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KNIGHT'S PAST

(EC)

KNIGHT'S PAST

a **FOREVER KNIGHT** zine

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Denysé M. Bridger
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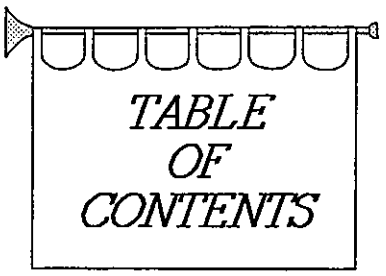
Bill Hupe & Peg Kennedy
Footrot Flats
916 Lamb Road
Mason, MI
U.S.A. 48854-9445

For:

NIGEL BENNETT,

as always ...

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COVER ART . . . . . Bea Lawlor

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KNIGHT'S PAST started as a labour of love, and I hope, in the end, we've lived up to that promise. The contents are different, and I think express an interesting array of creative styles. Much of the material is of an adult nature, so if you have young and impressionable minds about the house, you might want to keep the book out of reach.

The fabulous cover is from the sole U.S. contributor. Bea's talent has been dazzling EQUALIZER fans for some time, and I am truly thrilled to have her work on our début issue! If you like what you see, check out the Ad page at the back, Bea's talent isn't exclusive to drawing!

Other contributions, virtually all Canadian, by the way, include a couple of unusual features that I haven't seen before. Wolfe-Heart gives us a faerytale world that offers LaCroix a different view of his (un)life. We have the pleasure of a unique interview/story that reveals the subtle nuances of Blood via vampiric senses. Also, an expanded version of a humourous and satirical "Advice Column" which originally appeared in the FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA newsletter.

I had originally meant for this to be an exploration of Nick's past, but it turned into a collection of mixed madness that gives us intriguing and varying glimpses of Nick's Dark Master. So, in spite of intention, you're holding a mix of things from satire to erotic passions. Call it editorial power, but I decided to include a couple of these pieces despite the obvious conflict of the guidelines! I hope you'll enjoy all the contrasts that are represented in these pages -- it was fun to put this together, and if you like it, we may do it again! Let me know.

The timelines for the stories included span the centuries, from a noble house of Rome, to ancient Alexandria, to a Louisiana Plantation in the early 1800's. The visions are breathtaking and terrifying in their sensuality and scope. Garnett Ste. Croix's poetic magick is an experience in seductive obsession -- like our vampires.



Who are you?

Vision of wonder and beauty
Rich textures of timeless allure
I remember the first time
Your eyes trapped my soul
Claimed something you knew
was rightfully yours
Long before I understood

How many lifetimes ago?

The millennia span our knowledge
of each other
Has there ever been a time
when this wasn't so?

The Coliseum is quiet now
The madness and revellry continues
The streets echo with indulgences
My house is filled with hungers
Entwined bodies strain for ecstasy
That precious, elusive instant
of perfect rapture
That moment I have never known

Darkness calls to my spirit

night air heavy with the scents
of forbidden mysteries
Stars sparkle above me
each diamond shard a
fragment of perfect light
in a black tapestry of eternal
emptiness
This is the reflection of my heart
brilliant glitters of promise
smothered by a cloak of protective
night
The heavens are my confidante
The observer of my loneliness

Music pierces the sounds
to which my ears have learned deafness
Soft lilting chords of enchantment
weave their way through my seclusion
The reverberation of seductive
searching
finds its answer singing in my veins
Cold suddenly takes away the night's warmth
Fear wakes a tiny thrill of wonder
within my trembling body

Come to me
let me wake you to your destiny
Feel me
breathing within your
soul
You were born belonging to me

No!
I cannot listen to the satyr's song
I know you are out there
Beckoning
And I know you will take from me
things of which I have no understanding
the essence of loss that defines
my existence

You
will become that existence
And I
will be your willing slave

Answer me
let your heart guide you
to my bed
to my body
Worship as you were meant to
as consort to
your truest Master

The music
His voice made voiceless
I need to see this
musician of my Fate
My heartbeat is rapid
as I retrace the steps that led me
to the night
I do not recall inviting
any capable of creating this magick

Beneath the soft linen folds
of my gown
my body trembles
Sweat warms the curve of my spine
and the weight of material
pressing against my breasts
feels suffocating
My nipples ache
Hungry for a touch I have never wanted
Eager to meet the maker of this
siren-song to lust

I feel you
your awakening
You have not yet found me
among the hordes who
play at passion

and are deceived by delusion
Come closer
Find me

Where are you?
The music of your lute
incites a fever
that leaves me dizzy and weak
My knees are shaky
steps unsure for the first time
This is my home you invade

And you are my home to invade
sweet angel of life
You
are my salvation
as I will be your downfall
Your descent into
the darkness of your desires

Help me!
Gods above
How can this creature be real?
Silver hair, shorn and soft
frames the most perfect face
I have ever witnessed
His eyes are bluer than the Mediterranean
His mouth curves upward
with the hint of mysterious knowledge
Promises hover there
oaths of passion and pain
Pale flesh, lean and sculpted
An artist's dream
His hands caress the strings of
the instrument cradled to his shoulder
Long fingers evoke the sounds
of witchcraft and temptation
The suggestions that will
stir the tempest within my
treacherous body

Yes!
I feel your fear, sweet one
Your lust is a headier scent
tainted by confusion
taunted by breathless promise
Emerald eyes
glitter with crystalline tears
Drops of pain
that testify to your
Hunger
Your need for completion
For my possession

The music has stopped
and he raises his head
slowly
Sapphire eyes scan the room
and I feel his desire
rush through me
branding me his whore
long before I comprehend he's done so

What is this ache within me?
My limbs betray my excitement
Heat and chill rise and fall
My heart beats in rapid staccato
and I know he hears
He knows every thought
before I think it
Every shiver before it reaches
my shaken consciousness

Beauty
has found me at last
My copper haired maiden
Virgin bride
of the night's god
Sacrifice
to eternity

Her fear is almost as intoxicating as her want
This is my glory and my weakness
Her blood pulses with desires
repressed
Smouldering as only the true temptress
can
She will demand my surrender

And I will grant you
your desires
Sate your hungers
as I teach you of things
you cannot now imagine
You
are mine
I
am yours

No words find their way to my lips
No greeting
however trite is allowed to break
this silence
This communion of ancient souls
He takes my hand
and I lean into him
My body seeks contact with this magician

His laughter
blends with the madness that rings in my ears
Somehow I know that this is not the place
Despite the oblivion around us
Shaking
I lead him along darkened corridors
Heedless of the whispers
our passing incites

Lead me to your destruction
Angel
to the fulfillment of your
ultimate awakening

I can hardly bear this waiting
this teasing promise
Your soft curves tempt me
your innocence
sustains my passion
tames the beast
while inflaming me

Candles have been lit
The doors to my chamber shut quietly
and his hands now rest at my waist
hold me to him
His mouth on my neck is gentle
and the shudders his tongue arouse
make me cry out softly

I step away from him
and stare into the cool yet heated lust
that burns within indigo eyes
I don't know you
He smiles
and I hear his voice for the first time
a silken caress of erotic sensuality

You know me
just as you want me
breathing within you
moving within you
You want to devour me
submit to my ravenous hunger

The flowing robes he wears
pool around his feet
and he steps closer
His hands catch mine
pull me back to him
before he teaches them a new purpose
His flesh is cool
smoother than the finest marble
And finally

he allows me his taste
Full lips cover mine
his tongue probes and duels with mine
as the knot of my gown is loosened
Naked skin touches naked skin
and my arms cling to him

Mentor
Master
Guide me in this new world
Take my body and educate me to your needs
while you reorder my life

His mouth is a flame that sears
Softly suckles tender nipples
as his fingers seek
the heat that burns between my thighs
The room is a candlelit blur
my feet no longer touch the ground
Then the bed is beneath me
As I am trapped by his limbs
Entwined in a prison
I willingly entered

Your life is about to begin
as you die in my arms
Your blood will burn in my veins
as your spirit finds freedom
and your soul remains
forever bound to me
Your warmth is
the heaven I have waited for
Your body the prize
which rewards my patient search

I'm afraid
as I lie here entangled in his arms
my legs yielding to his weight
opening me to his urgent need
His voice soothes
promises ecstasy with such assurance

I believe him

There is something forbidden
in this lusting rapture
this savage joining we engage in
He is not fierce or demanding
without care for my ignorance
But he will not be denied
His invasion is careful
but pain arcs through me
and I feel the faint warmth of blood
trickling from me
as he fills me with his being

I have tried to be gentle
Your love is shadowed by fright
and that too is thrilling
You are afraid of my lust
even as you revel in the power
you do not yet know you possess
Your body knows me
as your mind cannot
Yet

Screams rise in my throat
he silences me with his kiss
and I feel the true depth of his passion
His desire touches my mind
as his body demands that I allow his
satiation

What is this madness
that builds inside me?
Pain is a distant memory
the only reality I know is him
The only truth I know
is that I am his
Lover
Whore
It matters not at all
I am simply his

Sharp breathless agony
pierces my throat
and I bleed again in his arms
He takes my life from me
and returns it a thousand times
as the darkness brushes
at the fringes of my awareness

Drink!
Accept my life as yours
be reborn in my image
Child
Lover
You are these
and so much more
But you **are** mine
never doubt that truth
nor my selfishness
There will be no others
Not for you

I am LaCroix

Vision of wonder and beauty
Rich textures of timeless allure
I remember the first time
Your eyes trapped my soul
Claimed something you knew
was rightfully yours
Long before I understood

When, Beloved?

It began many lifetimes ago
The millennia span our knowledge
of each other
There has never been a time
when this wasn't so?

PRELUDE TO ETERNITY

Based in part on an idea from

NIGEL BENNETT

NOTE: I'd like to Thank Nigel Bennett for the inspiration which created this story. It's vastly different from what we now know are LaCroix's origins, but his comments and suggestions intrigued me. It wouldn't be fair to write the story, and not give him the credit he is due for his input and imagination. Some of the basic concepts are Mr. Bennett's, the rest you can blame on me.

* * * * *

EGYPT 331 B.C. ---

The House of Cambyses was shrouded in uncertainty as both servants and nobility awaited news of the arrival of the first son born to the new rulers of Egypt. The political alliance had been made the previous year, at the end of the Persian Dynasty. The marriage of the former Pharaoh's daughter had caused equal parts dismay and relief. It was a gesture of faith, and all knew that had she a choice, the girl would never have accepted her present rôle. But, the King of Macedonia had taken firm hold of Egypt, and in deference to that man's new status, the first-born son of former royalty would carry Alexander's name as a tribute.

HELIOPOLIS 315 B.C. ---

Alexander tossed fitfully on his bed. He was vaguely aware of the need to escape his dreams, but somehow he was unable to tear his mind from the vision offered to him. A hazy sense of danger tugged at his consciousness, then vanished as the boy's familiar, angelic face came into view.

Alexander slipped willingly into peaceful slumber, and allowed the dream to show him a glorious purpose.

Five years later ---

The Temple of Ra was filled with worshippers for the first time a great number of months. This, the most ancient of the many religions that dominated the history of Egypt, was not the faith of choice within the present nobility. Other, lesser cults, were in favour. Still, in this historic city, the greatest of the Temples dedicated to the Sun-God, Ra reigned supreme.

The young priest who watched stared in respectful benevolence as the gathered devotees offered tribute to the Holiest of the Gods. He'd been initiated only a few years, yet he had already risen in power and influence within the Temple.

Ptolemy was mounting a war against the present rulers, and the people were once again living in terror. Inside this tranquil, palatial sanctuary, there was the elusive promise of salvation and redemption.

He heard the whisper of an acolyte's approach and turned to stare at the youth. This boy was new to their inner circle, and had brought great wealth to the Temple in exchange for anonymity. Wide, dark eyes glanced off his, then gazed downward in the expected gesture of humility.

"What is it, boy?" he enquired in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Nicklus has arrived," the young man informed him. "He has been escorted to your private chambers."

He nodded, placed a gentle hand on the youth's slender shoulder, then turned from the low chants that were slowly filling the sanctuary.

* * *

"Alexander, I was beginning to think you had changed your mind."

The laughing voice greeted the priest as he stepped into the solemn chambers his position within the Temple had accorded him. He smiled, the shift in expression eased sombre features into a radiance that would have charmed any woman he chose, had that been his intention.

"You have arrived early," the tall, fair-haired priest replied quietly. The swish of his robes was the only discernible sound as he poured wine for his guest, then joined the boy.

He handed his visitor a gleaming gold goblet, and watched with curious eyes as the young man hardly tasted of the rich wine. One arched eyebrow rose in speculative wonder, but he made no comment. Instead, he took a seat at the table which served to hold countless parchments and scrolls. Alexander never tired of the rich beauty of the illuminated manuscripts, and the vast history they revealed to him.

"Do you wish to begin our lessons?" The irony, and the near impudence in Nicklus' voice drew a sharp look from the priest. He laughed softly and went to sit opposite the blue eyed elder he had chosen.

"Why do you wish to learn our history?" Alexander asked. "You are wealthy, and Greek. What can this mean to you?"

Nicklus grew serious, and he leaned forward in his gold-trimmed chair. For endless moments, dark blue eyes met pale sapphire, then he touched Alexander's hand. Only the most fleeting contact was made, yet the intensity of the brush was unmistakable. Alexander moved his hand away.

"Perhaps we have things to teach each other?" Nicklus suggested and casually leaned back to watch the effect his words would have on the older man.

Alexander weighed the decree, wondered what this mere youth thought he could offer him in exchange for his teachings. It seemed an absurd proposal to a priest of Ra that a boy barely into his manhood would possess such arrogance that he thought himself more worldly than his elders. But, Nicklus was Greek, and his family's wealth was great -- so it was rumoured.

The older man considered his guest, let his gaze wander over the fair features. Nicklus accepted his scrutiny without apparent notice. The boy was handsome, Alexander conceded. Golden blond hair crowned a proud and noble head, deep blue eyes were a reflection of the Mediterranean itself. There was something vaguely cruel in the smooth curve of Nicklus' generous mouth, and the taint of depravity was subtly hidden by charm and laughter. Yet, it was there. The boy was slender, appeared little more than fourteen or fifteen years old, but his manner spoke of a man much older. One who had seen things Alexander could not comprehend despite his extensive education and elite background. The inconsistencies of this boy's personality were a curiosity, and a mystery that begged to be explored and explained.

"Are you reconsidering our arrangement, Alexander?" Nicklus smiled, smugly. "Or choosing a place to begin?"

Alexander's eyebrow rose at the faint challenge. He smiled without warmth. "Perhaps we should begin with a lesson in humility?" he suggested sardonically.

"Then I would fail miserably," Nicklus assured him. "So why don't we go to another?"

Another silence, this one less contemplative, filled the space between them for several moments. Then, decision made, Alexander nodded and selected a scroll from those that littered the tabletop.

* * *

The sun warmed his features as Alexander strolled the Temple gardens. All around him there was a profusion of life, and the scents of the quiet grounds barely registered within his consciousness. The brilliance of the morning light blinded him as he attempted a glance upward. He winced and quickly dropped his gaze to the ground. The night had been extremely long. Nicklus was a demanding and insolent pupil, yet his ability to absorb the most complex teachings was eerie. The priest had wondered more and more frequently if it was he, and not the Greek youth, who was the true student. The boy's knowledge was much broader in range than Alexander had suspected.

He sighed and sat on one of the marble benches that were scattered throughout the

garden. Many of the priests sought the peace and tranquility of this haven, and Alexander had spent many hours here. For the first time, it failed to soothe the ache and confusion that filled him. He was becoming discontent, and could not understand why.

The dreams that had been with him for so many years remained, but somehow they had changed. In recent months, the face of the boy/angel had become blurred, and he was no longer sure what had ever drawn him into the Temple. A vague, shadowy promise hovered on the edge of his consciousness, but he was unable to reach it and make it clear.

* * *

"This is redundant, Alexander," Nicklus complained and rose from his seat to pace the spacious splendour of the Temple's central area of worship. It was late, only a couple of hours away from dawn's first light, and they'd been studying the same material for several hours. Nicklus was bored.

"You were the one who wished to learn this history," the priest reminded his pupil softly. He didn't entirely object to the break, only the reason for it. It had been an exceptionally long day.

Nicklus turned and began to recite in a dull, faintly contemptuous tone:

"Ra, the sun, ruler of Earth. Had four children who became the principal deities of your culture. They were the gods Shu and Geb, and the goddesses Tefnut and Nut. Each became a part of the world as we know it. Shu and Tefnut are the atmosphere, Geb has become the earth we walk, and Nut is the sky above us." He paused for a moment, smiled thinly at the surprise Alexander wasn't able to fully conceal, then enquired icily. "Am I correct so far, priest?"

"Continue," Alexander requested, genuinely intrigued by the accuracy of his student's recital. He had doubted the attention Nicklus was giving the teachings.

Nicklus shrugged off his annoyance, and indulged his would-be mentor. "Geb and Nut eventually had two sons, Set and Osiris, as well as two daughters, Isis and Nephthys." He paused, then allowed the first sincere interest to surface to his expressive features. "Do you ever wonder about the cult of Osiris? Do you sometimes wish you served the son, and not the father?"

Alexander was startled by the enquiry, but paused to give it thought before answering. He eventually shook his head. "The cult of Osiris is like so many others, Nicklus. It will fade into dust. The Temples of Ra have stood for thousands of years."

"Does the darkness frighten you, priest?" the younger man asked with a laugh. "Do you fear that which cannot be illuminated by your Sun-God?"

"Ra chose his son to succeed him as god of this earth, Nicklus."

"That's not an answer, Alexander."

The priest declined further comment. Both knew Nicklus' observation was simple truth.

304 B.C. ---

"You've heard the news, of course?" Nicklus said quietly as he watched Alexander's careful hand at work on a papyrus scroll.

"What news might that be?" His voice was distracted, his concentration divided. He'd actually forgotten that Nicklus would be present this evening.

"Ptolemy has succeeded in establishing his new government," Nicklus replied impatiently. "Don't you deem anything outside this Temple worthy of your notice, Alexander?"

Alexander smiled and set aside his task, then turned to gaze at his visitor.

"Why do you continue to seek my teachings, Nicklus?" he questioned softly. "You mock my beliefs, yet you can recite the histories more accurately than my best students. You understand the enneads, you can structure the gods hierarchy, but it means nothing to you."

"The favoured god of our new ruler is Osiris," Nicklus began cautiously. "If he proclaims this the official religion, what will you do? Your Temple is already diminished, its wealth nearly gone."

Alexander shrugged. It was a question he had no answer for, and one he had considered repeatedly to no avail.

"Would you be willing to travel with me, Alexander?"

The query seemed to come from nowhere, and the priest laughed.

"I am serious, priest," Nicklus grinned. "I enjoy your company, even when you are being tedious. I've lingered here long enough."

"Where do you wish to go?" To his astonishment, Alexander discovered he was, indeed, considering the request.

"Nubia, Palistine, perhaps a lengthy stay in Alexandria. I feel in need of some culture," the young man finished with a broad smile. He turned speculative and thoughtful. "Alexandria, I think," he murmured. "There's a great deal we can learn there."

Alexander's expressive eyebrow arched. He made no comment.

ALEXANDRIA 299 B.C. ---

"I prefer to study THE BOOK OF THE DEAD, Alexander," Nicklus complained and tossed aside the scroll he'd been reading at the priest's request.

"THE BOOK OF THE DEAD is **not** what you came to me to understand," Alexander pointed out. His voice lacked conviction, and he felt an increasingly familiar unease settle within him.

"How many Ra worshippers have you encountered here, priest?" the young Greek enquired, his tone sardonic, taunting with his knowledge of the truth Alexander would never willingly voice.

As expected, the priest refused to comment. He rose and left his pupil. Nicklus smiled in satisfaction. He'd waited long enough, he decided suddenly. Alexander had been his

companion for several years, and during that time, Nicklus had watched the other man grow increasingly distant. His faith was wearing thin, and the vulnerability was intoxicating.

"Sleep, Alexander," Nicklus murmured to the silent room. His smile was pure, iniquitous delight.

* * *

Alexander tossed fitfully, his mind a world away from the reality he was living. His frustration bled into his dreams, and he raged in a dark and endless void. The abyss of nothingness mocked him, and he screamed his fury into the blackness. The echo of his cry laughed back at him, and filled him with despair.

"Alexander?"

He knew the voice. It had been many years since he'd heard it, but he recognised the soft resonances instantly. He turned toward the soothing tone, and reached out.

A light grew, and he was able to discern the shape of a youth approaching him. Everything about the glowing figure was familiar and reassuring. For the first time in too long, Alexander felt an old peace blossom to balm his battered spirit.

"Where have you been?"

"Waiting for you to see me," the boy replied gently.

Alexander said nothing. He waited. And the boy drew closer.

When the radiance grew too overwhelming, the priest closed his eyes and felt tears slowly trail along his cheeks. Emotion wrapped him in a turmoil of warmth and fear. When the touch of a hand brushing aside his tears roused him from his internal struggle, he opened his eyes and stared.

"You wish to be an angel, don't you, Alexander?"

The priest nodded, dumbfounded. So much now made sense to him.

"I can give you what you wish, Alexander," the child crooned with an unearthly smile. "But you must trust me."

"I do," the priest vowed.

"You must obey without question, and I will grant what you wish," the pale figure assured him. "I will make you an angel. And you will be worshipped as you deserve."

The light grew again in intensity until the priest was certain he would be blinded by it. Then, abruptly, there was only darkness.

* * *

He woke with a startled gasp, and was immediately conscious of another presence in his chambers. When he would have lit a candle, a hand on his wrist prevented the action.

"It's only me, Alexander," Nicklus laughed quietly.

Alexander felt the chill of an icy finger caress his spine as he listened to the soft,

mocking sound. He should have recognised it, yet somehow he hadn't. The boy in the dream, the child who promised him eternity and Holy purpose -- it was Nicklus.

Silence settled within the darkened room, and Alexander heard nothing but the sound of his own erratic breaths. His mind was filled with confusion and uncertainty, and he knew despite his blindness that Nicklus was smiling in mocking amusement.

"You've finally recognised me, haven't you, priest?"

The tone was sardonic, indolent with satisfaction.

"Why ... ?" Alexander hesitated, searched for words that would not be found. Indeed, what was it he wanted to ask of this child who had haunted his entire life in some fashion?

"You have a greater purpose than this, Alexander," the boy assured him. "Your fate goes far beyond this fleeting mortality you currently possess. You teach about the Ka, yet you fear the judgement that awaits you in the court of Osiris. What if you never have to face that challenge? I can insure you live forever, Alexander."

The priest heard the words, was lulled by the hypnotic softness of his young pupil's voice. And he believed, in spite of the wrongness of it. Nicklus spoke truth. He did fear the demon assistants who presided in the court of Osiris. If their judgement of his life was not favourable, he would be denied the heavenly realm of Yaru. He would be given to the executioners, condemned to whatever damnations the demons desired. Yes, he feared what his life would ask of him at its close.

"Do you wish to live forever, Alexander?" the soft, insistent voice purred. "To be the judge of those who will follow you? To be as a god in your own kingdom? I can give you this, priest."

Again, there was silence. For a long time, Alexander contemplated the boy's promises, the hope they offered. Somewhere inside him, he sensed that what Nicklus offered was not truth, nor was it the beautiful gift he implied. But, to live forever ... So much could be learned, and taught. So many things preserved within his memory. It was an alluring promise...

* * *

At some point throughout the night, Alexander had fallen into a peaceful sleep. He had never answered Nicklus, and for many months, nothing was said of the revelations made that night. The priest began to believe he'd dreamed the boy's visit. His nights and dreams were haunted by the promises Nicklus made, and the visions that tormented Alexander grew in intensity. Yet, Nicklus never spoke again of the light and hope he had offered. He waited, and the priest grew ever more discontent.

ALEXANDRIA 296 B.C. ---

The Temple was hushed and tranquil, but there was an undercurrent of elation in the air

that was nearly tangible. Alexander felt it as soon as he stepped into the torch-lit halls. It was late, and the summons that brought him to the place of worship had been vague, though insistent of the time.

He walked, mildly disconcerted by the lack of people within the hallowed corridors. If there was a service being held in the Temple, some of the priests should have been present. He heard, faintly, a low, murmuring chant. As he allowed himself to be drawn toward the sound, his stomach tightened in anticipatory curiosity, and a building tension that he knew was excitement.

"They're waiting for you, Alexander," a familiar voice beckoned.

The priest froze, and peered into the shadows. Nicklus had spoken, but there was a quality to the boy's tone that was disquieting. As the golden haired youth stepped toward him, Alexander shuddered. A trick of the light, he insisted to himself. For an instant, Nicklus' eyes had appeared golden and glowing.

"What is going on, Nicklus?"

"Your disciples await you, priest," the blond boy grinned. "They have come to meet their god, Alexander. Just as I promised you they would."

* * *

The ceremony was long, and Alexander basked in the reverence with which his teachings were accepted. Night after night they gathered, and he grew intoxicated with the power he held over each and every one of the faithful followers. Nicklus encouraged and laughed at him in equal measures.

"Drink, Alexander," Nicklus suggested as they walked toward the Temple that night.

The priest took the proffered wine and drank deeply. He winced at the bitterness of it, and handed it back to the smiling boy. They stood outside the massive entrance to the building, and Alexander was perplexed yet again by the sameness of his young companion. He had been with Nicklus for years, but the boy never changed. He did not grow old, nor did he speak of family.

Moonlight glinted off golden hair, and wreathed Nicklus in a silvery halo. He truly looked to be an angel. As if sensing the other man's thoughts, he smiled up into Alexander's deep sapphire eyes.

"Tonight is going to be special, I can feel it," Nicklus decreed with a soft laugh. Before the priest could question his words, he led the way into the Temple.

* * *

The wine must have clouded his mind. Alexander's limbs felt leaden and he was finding it impossible to concentrate on the words he wanted to speak. The room was filled with people, the same loyal followers who had been coming here nightly. But something about them was

different this night. They were bored, and restless. He sensed anxiety, then realised it was his own worry that plagued him. Instinctively, he searched for Nicklus among the crowd.

The boy felt his gaze and turned.

Alexander's blood became ice in his veins. He tried to back away and remained rooted to the spot. Nicklus smiled. The boy's blue eyes flared with preternatural light, and the priest grew lethargic and pliant.

Through the haze of many voices and the flickering glow of torches, Alexander felt himself lifted to an altar and arranged to Nicklus' careful instructions. He wanted to call out, to object, but he was unable to utter a sound. Fear bloomed within him, and he closed his eyes, began the ritual of prayers he'd almost forgotten in his arrogant taste of power.

"I promised you that you would be an angel, Alexander," Nicklus whispered close to his ear. "A god. I am going to keep my promise, priest. You and I will be joined eternally, Alexander."

Alexander shook his head, continued the litany that might save his soul.

"Look at me, priest!"

Despite his desire not to comply, Alexander's eyes fluttered open and he was snared again by a blue so brilliant it rivalled the sun-brightened skies above the Nile.

"No!"

It was a hoarse gasp of protest, barely audible.

It was ignored.

"Your life for eternal power, Alexander," Nicklus said quietly. "You will never die. You will lead and conquer as you chose. Nothing will be able to destroy you. Isn't that what you desire more than anything else, priest? You will never have to answer to the demons of Osiris, for you will never be in their court. They judge the dead, Alexander. And you will never truly be dead."

Alexander's head swam with the words, tried to find some semblance of familiar truth in them. Nothing offered him a respite from his terror. It grew seconds later as the room exploded with voices and laughter. The taunts were jumbled, incoherent surges of sounds, completely without form. Only fear responded within the fallen priest of Ra.

Nicklus leaned over him, and again his ethereal beauty filled Alexander's vision. The boy smiled, and the priest screamed from his soul as he saw for the first time the elongated incisors. The fangs of the truest demon he had ever encountered. Blue eyes mutated into searing flames, and he silenced the shriek of terror and denial that rose inside him as Nicklus' head descended.

Pain enveloped Alexander's body, exploded with the intensity of a thousand suns burning down on his prone body. He felt the hands that held him rigidly to the stone altar, the grips relentless, and without compromise or compassion. His stomach roiled against the sensation of cool lips on his neck, the gliding stroke of a tongue caressing his skin, and the low growl of Nicklus as he fed on the spurting blood of his unwilling victim.

The perceptions and sounds had faded to muffled shadows when Alexander was gagged

by the wrist that was placed over his mouth. He gasped, realised too late that the instinctive reaction had opened his mouth to the flow of blood. He tried to twist away from the forced bonding, but firm hands again held him captive and helpless to fight what he knew was being done to him. His mouth filled with the sticky, metallic liquid of Nicklus' blood, and he tried desperately not to swallow.

Seconds later, he was struck and the choked response to the pain opened his throat. He felt the shadows deepen and after an endless expanse of time, he was released. He no longer possessed the life to move.

* * *

He woke.

Memory was hazy, uncertain.

The scents of the night teased as his awareness, and he turned toward the whispering breeze that filtered through an open window. The sky was a deep, velvety blue, almost black. Stars were beginning to stud the blanket with glittering diamond-bright sparks of light. A crescent moon was slung low in the eastern sky.

Hunger gnawed his belly. But there was no familiarity to the impression to identify it to his confused mind. Experimentally, he moved a hand and touched the coolness of his naked skin. He was cold, like a corpse. Very slowly, he raised himself from the pallet and stood. His limbs were weak, and the effort to move made him gasp softly. He realised in astounded afterthought, that he didn't need to breathe the air.

He took the few shaky steps that would place him at the window's edge, then he gazed outward. Against the growing darkness was a greater blackness. Outlined in jagged relief, like a spectral silhouette, rose the Temple of Ra. He knew it immediately.

And, he remembered ...

* * *

Alexander banished the rage and the despair he felt as he permitted the memories of his life to drift before his mind's eye. He accepted what had happened, knew he must if he expected to survive what he had become. The foolishness of his thirst for power was painfully clear to him now. Clear as it had never been when the reality of true life was his. The legends had whispered of creatures like Nicklus. He hadn't believed.

So much was lost to him now, he knew. Nicklus had promised eternity, but the priest knew no gift so great came without an equal sacrifice. To maintain his existence, he would destroy other lives. Another rumble deep within him reminded of the need for sustenance.

The craving was near pain. He felt repelled by his hunger. And the loathing distorted his handsome features for several minutes as he clutched the edge of the window and sought control of his chaotic thoughts. His smile was grim when he heard the faint sound of an

approaching footfall. He shouldn't have been able to detect Nicklus' nearing, but already his senses were much sharper than the boy would anticipate.

* * *

A tiny flutter of fear made the boy hesitate outside the transformed priest's room. Nicklus paused, analysed the aberration with clinical detachment, then dismissed it. He had not felt real fear in several hundred years. He certainly had nothing to fear from a weak fledgling of his own making. He pushed the door inward.

* * *

Alexander's smile grew as the golden haired boy stepped into the room. He was pleased to note that he had no trouble discerning Nicklus, each detail of the other vampire's countenance vivid in its clarity despite the darkness that engulfed them.

His mind reacted before he understood the intent of his actions. Alexander shifted his position, his motion so swift that neither he nor the startled boy seemed prepared for the realisation of the attack.

One of Alexander's hands closed over Nicklus' throat, the other tangled in the thick mane of golden curls. He snapped the boy's head back, heard the crack of bones, then tore into exposed flesh with fangs that ached with hunger.

Before the blood lust had receded and left him sane again, Alexander had rended the boy's body to pieces in his rage and betrayal. He felt nothing as he stepped into the night and began the journey that would lead him through the centuries ...

THREE CENTURIES LATER (A.D.): The Court of Pontius Pilate ---

A murmur of discontent rippled through the gathered assemblage as the strident tone of Pilate's judgement rang out. The strangely weary eyes of the prisoner rested briefly on the silent advisor who stood several feet behind the main dias. Alexander, immune to all sense of morality and humanity, felt stripped naked before that sad gaze. His lifeless heart contracted with fear.

As it always did, fear translated into anger and hatred. When Pilate gestured him forward to consult, he offered the mortal a punishment in keeping with his own thirst for vengeance.

* * *

He would never know what drew him to the hillside days later. The sun burned low, as if the very heavens were shadowed by grief. Yet, the vampire remained untouched by any of

the pain that surrounded him on the bloody front. He stood before the crude cross that was the place of death for the condemned Nazarene. Again, the eyes of this gentle man unnerved and unsettled the implacable vampire.

The man was dying.

Alexander had a keen sense of encroaching death. He was often the cause of it.

'Angel of Death.'

He wasn't sure if the words inside his head were his own, or a whisper from the man who was near death before him. It was an appropriate name to give him, the most honest of the many he'd taken over the past several centuries.

A chill touched his spine.

The shadows were growing longer, yet the sun blazed infinitely brighter behind the figure who commanded the former priest's enraptured attention.

'You have damned your kind to a darkness greater than any you have known before.'

Again the words whispered softly, sadly, into his barren consciousness.

As Alexander watched, the sun passed behind the prisoner. He stood, immobile, and felt the shadow of the cross settle over him. Pain, a searing, fiery force that drove him to his knees burned into his dead flesh. He was being torn apart from within, and was helpless to move. Ice flooded through him in the fire's wake. Again, he was paralysed by the onslaught of terror and anguish.

For endless, eternal minutes, Alexander writhed before the cross. His mind screamed in a steady litany of agonised horror and emerging understanding. The darkness grew absolute around him and his pain eclipsed all other awarenesses.

* * *

He felt the moment of death. With it came a new knowledge of his limitations. The days of invulnerability were past. He didn't know how he knew, or why, but he was certain. The sun had returned to its placid beam, but Alexander's skin blistered and smouldered where it touched him. He dragged himself to his feet and ran.

* * *

It was deep into the night before he woke, face down, on his bed. The day's madness nudged his consciousness and he shook his head in denial. It changed nothing and he rose to stand before the shining surface of gleaming gold that showed him his reflection. He gasped in surprise when he saw the man who stared back at him, barely a solid form any longer. His hair was white, silvery pale, like moonlight. His body appeared translucent, insubstantial. His eyes blazed with the golden fire of the now forbidden sun, and he recoiled at the scars that marred his milky skin. Across his chest, angry red weals formed the cursed shape that would forever signify the truest bane of his existence.

Many years later, in a macabre mocking of that curse, the vampire would recreate himself, and become the symbolic lightbearer and cross: Lucien LaCroix.

THE LADY OF THE RAVEN

It was the most incredible thing you can imagine. I'd been given the assignment of a lifetime, or so I thought! Then I discovered the reason for my sudden rise to popularity -- the Editor couldn't find anyone stupid enough to take on this one! So, naturally, being uniquely qualified for odd, (the office boys told me that, and I **still** don't know what they were driving at, but that's a different story entirely!), I was handed the job of tracking down a vampire to interview. Yeah, you read that correctly, a vampire -- resplendid with fangs, blood lust, bat wings, and aversion to all things holy!

That was several weeks ago, and as you can guess, I'm still on page one of the article -- the part that says, "Interview With The Vampire" by . . . (Lestat's not in town, and I ain't Anne Rice!) I'd have called it quits a week ago, but the bastards are so smug I gotta find something to keep them off my back.

* * *

"Carli, **that** place looks just about perfect!"

She turned off the hand held recorder and peered out the window as her photographer slowed the car to a crawl. He was right, this club had the right ambiance if nothing else. She laughed when she realised Chris had already pulled into a parking space that had just been vacated.

A few minutes later they were outside the main entrance. Carli pointed above the doors and Chris nodded as he lifted his camera and focused on the artistic sign. It filled the window he peered through and a shiver of excitement woke inside him. THE RAVEN, somehow he just **knew** they were gonna get lucky in this place.

He clicked off several shots of the club's banner then cast a quick glance at his partner. Carli was looking past the building, her eyes seeming to search the thick, fog-laden night air of the sky above them. Maybe she was losing it, or starting to believe what they were tracking was real.

She shook off the eerie chill and winked at her friend and cohort. "I think this is gonna be our lucky night, Chris."

He grinned and they headed inside.

* * *

"Oh, man, this place is incredible!" Chris breathed in unabashed appreciation. They continued their casual stroll through the shadowy room and he grinned at the various invitational gazes that were cast in his direction.

"Try and keep your mind on business," Carli suggested when she spotted him straying toward a tall, deathly pale blonde who beckoned with an outstretched hand. Carli yanked her friend back to her side and was about to approach the bar when she was tapped on the shoulder. The unexpected touch caused her to yelp in fright before she could quell the response. She turned and stared into the most beautiful blue eyes she'd ever seen.

"May I help you?"

The two mortals gaped, one only slightly less awed than the other.

"Wow!"

Carli managed, just, not to repeat the evaluation. She smiled weakly and relaxed minutely when the beautiful woman before her returned the expression. She's stunning, Carli thought.

"We're here to soak up some of the atmosphere," Carli offered when she realised she hadn't answered. "I'm supposed to be doing an interview, and since it's 'mission impossible', I decided to write a . . ." Her words trailed to a halt as soon as she saw the laughter in the dazzling gaze.

"I am Janette," she said softly. "This is my club."

Recalling her manners, Carli extended her hand. Janette barely touched her as they greeted each other. "I'm Carli Michaels, and this is my photographer, Chris Samuels."

"I would appreciate it if you did not take pictures of any of my clients without their permission, Monsieur Samuels," Janette stated.

Chris stared at her, his smile automatic. He loved the way she spoke, the accent gave his name a distinctive sound he wouldn't have believed possible. He nodded when one delicate eyebrow rose to punctuate the request he hadn't answered.

"May I buy you a drink?" Janette asked as she led Carli to the bar. Chris trailed after them, something the dark-haired vampire knew without a backward glance. His rapid heartbeat was like a siren song that lured and intrigued.

Carli leaned against the bar and slowly looked around the club. It was unusual, to say the least.

"Have you been running this place long?"

"A few years," Janette acquiesced with a smile. She toyed with the wine glass in her hand, smiled slightly when Carli's eyes met hers and couldn't look away. "I don't recall seeing

you come into my club before tonight."

"This is the first time," Carli answered, then pulled her gaze away from the beautiful woman. She shuddered inwardly. She was gaping at this lovely woman like she was attracted to her -- and Carli had never felt a twinge of attraction for any member of her own sex, ever. She noticed Chris was equally taken with Janette, and that offered her a small reassurance, though she couldn't begin to fathom why it should.

"You are a photographer," Janette said quietly, her eyes glanced off the camera around the young man's neck. "And Carli is?"

"A reporter," Chris supplied without hesitation. "We're supposed to find a vampire to interview for the magazine."

Janette felt a moment of very unwanted apprehension. She straightened and her huge blue eyes bored into Carli's annoyed stare. The other woman was clearly angry that Chris had spoken so openly.

"Vampire?"

Carli all but flinched. Then she sighed heavily and nodded. She tossed back the vodka and orange juice she'd ordered, coughed at the unexpected burning in her throat, then turned to face Janette squarely.

"It's my boss's idea of a joke," she told the club owner. "I've been asking for a real assignment for months, and this was his idea of paybacks."

"You don't believe in vampires?" Janette enquired with a sympathetic but curious smile.

"Do you?" Carli retorted. "I could kill the old bastard for this one. He finally gives me a job, and it turns out to be a bad joke. I wish I could find a vampire, just to shut them up!"

"And what would you do if I told you that you had found a nightclub filled with vampires?" Janette speculated with a delicately raised eyebrow.

"I'd say thanks for trying to help me out," Carli smiled weakly. "I wish there was a way to do this thing."

"There is," Janette assured her. The idea was amusing to the vampire, and if nothing else, it would make the evening a little more interesting than most were in recent weeks. "You may interview me for your magazine."

Carli laughed. She let her eyes drift over the slender beauty before her. "You may look the part, Janette, but... "

"I feel the part," Janette grinned. "And, I assure you, you will not be disappointed."

Chris was looking eagerly at Carli, his camera poised to take pictures of the extraordinarily lovely woman making the bizarre offer.

"Why not," Carli shrugged. "Are you going to let Chris take pictures of you. If nothing else, it will promote your club. I can't promise it'll do much for the image, but it's your call."

Janette's laughter was filled with amusement they couldn't begin to appreciate. She indicated a door off to one side of the long bar. "We will be able to talk more privately," she told Carli when the reporter fell into step beside her. Chris once again was left to follow them. Through the heavy thrum of music that filled the nightclub, Janette heard the tiny tell-tale click

of the camera's shutter.

* * *

They were seated in a comfortable office, Janette was behind a large mahogany desk and Carli was across from her in a deep, cushioned chair. Chris sat off to one side, unobtrusively taking pictures. A small recorder had been placed in the centre of the gleaming desktop.

"When did you first become a vampire?" Carli asked the question sceptically, uncomfortable with the humour she read in Janette's brilliant blue eyes. She had the distinct feeling the woman was laughing at them. And, she admitted to herself, she was perfectly certain Janette had plenty of reason to be doing precisely that.

"Several thousand years ago," Janette murmured casually and lit a slim, imported cigarette. She inhaled deeply and blew a tiny wreath of smoke into the air.

"Could you be more specific?"

"Non."

Carli shrugged. She looked at the notes she'd made, despite her certainty that she was being ridiculous. Still, it would make a decent story, if she handled it properly. Janette seemed to have slipped into the part without much prompting, so why not take advantage of it.

"Who made you ... uh, who did ... " Carli stumbled on the phrasing and stared at Janette.

"I was brought across by a man called LaCroix," Janette told her.

"Yeah? What was he like?"

Janette's laughter this time was cold, filled with subtle shades of bitterness and hatred.

"LaCroix is not a man easily described, chéri," she eventually said with eerie softness. "He was ancient, powerful. Terrifying. He demanded total surrender to all his passions."

Carli felt a tremor of unease touch her spine like an icy finger. Janette's eyes had grown dark and angry.

"Where is he now?"

"Dead." When she realised the choice of word, she smiled. "Truly dead," Janette amended softly.

"How'd that happen?" Carli wondered in the back of her mind why she was lingering on this particular part of the story -- after all, it wasn't like Janette was telling her something that was real. Was it?

"Another of our kind destroyed him," Janette replied, her eyes suddenly faraway, sad.

"Someone you care about," Carli proposed, attuned to the other woman's mood on some level.

"Oui," Janette murmured. "Someone very dear to me."

"Have you known him for a long time?"

Janette laughed again, and her smile was warm, filled with near mischief.

"Approximately eight hundred years," she answered.

Carli's eyes opened wide, stared. After several moments of awkward silence, silence Janette appeared to enjoy immensely, the reporter regained her composure.

"Is he in Toronto?"

"He's a cop," Janette told her with a wicked gleam of delight in her eyes.

"A cop!"

"Mmmm ... He is repaying a debt he feels he owes you humans."

Somehow, the 'you humans' sounded decidedly unflattering.

"Why are you running a nightclub?"

"I enjoy the atmosphere," Janette shrugged.

"How do you feel about your life?"

Janette measured the question, and its source, before she leaned back in her chair.

"You ask interesting questions, Carli."

"But do you have an interesting answer, Janette?"

"I enjoy my life, as you put it. I have more wealth than you can imagine, I've seen entire cultures rise and fall. There is very little I haven't done."

"Doesn't that get boring?"

"Sometimes," the vampire agreed.

"When was the last time you killed someone?"

That query came as a surprise to everyone present. Carli felt tension settle into her neck, create a genuine pain there. She waited, nervously twisted her hands in her lap.

"It is no longer necessary to kill," Janette answered after several moments of quiet. "Blood banks have made hunting obsolete. We're very careful."

"Is that why no one believes you exist now?"

"Quite probably," she nodded.

"Did you enjoy killing?"

Janette heard Chris gasp softly, and her gaze shifted to him for a second. He was captivated by the conversation, but obviously disturbed by the turn it was taking.

"I did," she gradually admitted. "It was exhilarating."

Carli's eyes narrowed. She believed her.

"LaCroix was your lover."

Startled, Janette peered intently at the young woman.

"He was much more than that, Carli."

"And the other one, the one you do love?"

"Nikola was very different from us, he hated what he was, what he is," she corrected.

"Why aren't you with him now?"

Janette hissed in anger, then controlled her irritation when she registered the fear in Carli's look.

"Love does not bridge near as many differences as you mortals like to imagine. We live in different worlds. It is impossible."

"Do you have any regrets?"

"About what?" Janette smiled.

"Do you miss anything? The sun? Friends?"

"I miss none of the weaknesses, Carli. Be very clear on that one point. What I am is a powerful and compelling addiction. When I was born, I had no rights. I was not considered a person, merely a property to be disposed of by my family. Married off to the most promising alliance. I was permitted none of the freedoms that you take for granted. It did not matter that I had intelligence, it was better **not** to question."

"Is that why you chose -- "

Janette's bitter laughter interrupted the question.

"Chose?" she repeated the word with icy sarcasm. "There was no choice, Carli, not as you mean. LaCroix offered me a life that would give me control, power, all the things I could never hope to have otherwise. And he wanted me as I was."

"What's it like... "

Janette waited when the girl's words faltered.

"... to take someone?"

The lovely vampire was thoughtful.

"It's incredibly erotic," she began. "The ultimate act of love, or hate, depending on the vampire."

"For you what was it?"

"Hunger, desire, hate of what I came from, love of what I became."

"Do you remember dying?"

"Oui," there was another hesitation, a search for the right words. "I remember lying in his arms, the pain of trying to draw breath, the weakness of death pulling me into darkness. It was terrifying, but all the more exciting for that fact. Waking was rebirth, the true beginning." She shivered at the ancient memory, hugged herself in reactive response to the inner chill.

"The first one was madness, and the addictiveness total. LaCroix gloried in what he was, he taught me to do the same. It wasn't until Nicholas joined us that I understood things like loyalty and love, and honour."

"He must be something else?"

Janette smiled. "He is."

"How did it feel to lose LaCroix?"

Pain shot through the stunning brunette, intense and searing.

"Part of me died with him, but ultimately, his death completed my liberty."

"You are free of any bonds?"

"Except those I choose to permit."

Carli let out a deep breath and closed her eyes. It was one hell of a story. It was almost a full minute before she became aware of the click of Chris's camera. She opened her eyes and stared at him.

"She didn't want -- "

"It's quite all right," Janette interjected softly. "Do you have enough for your story?"

Carli snapped off the recorder and dropped it into her bag.

"More than enough, thanks."

Janette stood up and walked around her desk. She leaned back against the edge and held out her hand to the reporter. Carli rose and the vampire maintained her loose grasp. Blue eyes locked with Carli's uneasy stare, the pull grew. Janette leaned forward, brushed a feather-like kiss across the woman's trembling lips, then she eased Carli back into her seat. We will meet again, ma chéri, Janette promised silently.

"I think we should be going," Chris suggested when he saw the lovely vampire step toward him.

"Of course," Janette agreed. "But first, you must let me take a photograph of you and Carli."

It didn't make sense, and he started to say so. Something in her compelling gaze silenced the words. He handed her the camera.

* * *

"This is impossible!" Chris snarled in absolute fury when he strode from the darkroom. He had a handful of proof sheets that were blank, or little more than grey haze.

"What the hell is your problem?" Carli snapped impatiently. She was at her computer terminal, glaring balefully at the screen. Her recorder was next to her.

"This!" Chris flung the stack of proofs on her desk. "There's not a single God-damn shot I can use. The whole fucking lot is over-exposed."

"The tape's blank too," Carli informed him. "And I can't remember a thing that was on it." She rubbed her eyes and felt a glorious headache blossom at the back of her head. "We did find a nightclub last night, didn't we?"

"Yeah," Chris nodded. "I think?"

"Great! You can't remember it either." She shut down the computer and walked to the window. The sunlight seemed overly bright to her eyes and she closed the shutters to dim the room. "I told Harrison I'd have the bloody interview on his desk by end of day."

"What do you intend to do?"

Carli felt a strange weakness assail her body as dazzling blue eyes flooded her vision. Loneliness and pain accompanied the image but no face coalesced to complete the picture. What did she intend to do?

JUST ANOTHER KNIGHT

by

David Gracey

There's nothing worse than night shift at The Pit with a whining vampire. I'd been busy making coffees to go for some of the mortals in the area, mostly radio jocks, dj's and cops.

Ford Peterson dropped by. He's not so bad now that he's stopped handing out those cards of his. You know, the ones that read: "Ford Peterson, Vampire at large." (I **still** wonder what he does with those cherry cokes.) Now, he's trying to be a writer. So far, his working title is "Genital Fingers in the Night." I don't know if that's a spelling mistake or if Ford is doing a soft core vampire novel. These days, it seems like everyone wants to write soft core vampire stuff. Ford was saying that he might move to New Orleans to do some research; I thought that would be kind of nice for all of us, and LaCroix would be in a good mood for change.

I knew it was him the moment Lez dropped the order for table six. Women see those dark blue eyes and that fluffy golden hair and they think he's such a stud muffin. Me? I think he looks like a slightly tarnished Apollo.

I was reminded of the first time I met him. It was in a noisy tavern near Devon, during Cromwell's war with our King Charles a few hundred years back, but not **that** long for our sort. Once again, the Knight was back ... and such guilt.

The Knight began one of his stories about his early days in Toronto and two young women he knew. He is always on about women he hasn't had. I'm used to him.

"I met the two young women in the late 1980's in downtown Toronto. Marie, a quiet, auburn-haired girl, painted lush, moody landscapes of indescribable intensity. Her companion, brash, brown-haired Lisa sold many artists' paintings and sculptures at shows across North America. Lisa wore an antique pewter pin in the form of a large, white wolf with emerald chips for its' eyes. Lisa was very well connected and a mortal of considerable character with many influential contacts who owed her or feared her.

Marie was very popular at the shows, and Lisa basked in the fame and the lucrative commissions. They were in the habit of dropping into The Raven around sunset, ordering a couple of Ceasars and flirting with the regulars. It wasn't long before LaCroix dropped in on his way to CERK radio station. He saw Marie, and that's when things changed.

You know what **he's** like; **he** wants all the "vintage" women for **his** own collection. It wasn't long before the NightCrawler was extolling the skill and beauty of Marie to one and all, and it turned her head. As Janette once said: "**LaCroix** can be a charmer with those sapphire-blue eyes and that chic, black cape of his."

Lisa was pissed. She wanted the glory that she deserved for finding Marie. I knew that Lisa painted under another name; it was second-rate stuff that didn't sell, but she wasn't happy being upstaged about it. Every night, I heard her carrying on outside the Raven telling the other vamps that she wasn't going give up or go unnoticed. She **would** have LaCroix.

Early one night, I visited Lisa's shop; she still represented some of the top talent, and I have always felt that **green-eyed** women were something special. I knew she was furious with Marie's new-found popularity, but I didn't realise that Lisa wanted the NightCrawler more than anything else. Can you imagine **me** being stood up for --- **LaCroix?**

"When I arrived in the shop, **he** was there ... feeding. **His** pale blue eyes locked on mine; I tried to conceal my emotions. **He** read my frustration and smirked.

"NightCrawlers feed at night, dear boy. What is your problem?"

Lisa thrashed weakly in **his** grasp as **he** fed, sucking noisily at her pale throat; in moments, the NightCrawler started to choke and gasp.

"What is wrong with this woman, Knight?"

An ancient member of our community such as LaCroix has spent much of his existence savouring only the best. Cow's blood has never passed **his** lips, let me tell you.

"This is really nasty, not at all a prime vintage. Knight, what in all of the **nine hundred names** is this female? She's not like anything I've tasted since that British **doctor** with the bad blood. This one isn't evil, just really awful."

He sucked and **he** choked and Lisa struggled weakly. It was obvious that she was near death. As I watched, she sank to the studio floor. **He** just glared at me and choked and sputtered, while I tried not to giggle.

"Answer me, Nicholas! What is this female?"

I leaned over Lisa as she sank toward death, and I pulled the pewter wolf pin from her grasp. The form writhed about and there on the floor lay a dead, white wolf.

Someone should have warned you, LaCroix. That female was an animal. Happy April 1st, **NightCrawler!**"

I don't know about you, but that Knight is just a little bit disturbing. Still the Knight is a fun guy, and the idea of **Himself** biting off more than **he** could handle is truly amusing.

Remember the Pit's motto: love 'em or kill 'em.

Yours, **Ambrose**

GARNETT STE. CROIX

Garnett Ste.-Croix is a gifted poet who permanently resides in the garden district of New Orleans. Presently best known to fans of the television series FOREVER KNIGHT, Garnett's unique and seductive style is quickly becoming a recognisable trademark to all fans of the vampiric genre. Over the past year, Garnett has been extensively published in the popular field of fanzines, and is currently preparing her own volume of poetics based on media and original vampires. That volume is due out within the coming year, and is expected to be called "To Decorate Your Flesh With Diamonds". Currently, Garnett's poetry can be found in the following media zines, most of which are available from FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA: "Forever Yours" Vols. I-III, "Waiting For Eternity", "Resurrection".

In non-media related areas, Garnett's credits include; appearances in publications such as "Flophouse The Book Of Poetry", "Borderland", as well as scattered periodicals and anthologies.

Mysterious and aloof, Garnett is the owner of several cats and lives in cool contrast to the lust and blood of her rich and fertile imagination. To experience Garnett's poetry is to hear the rhythms and music of the night ... Enjoy.

CHARLOTTE

Azalea Grove Plantation
Louisiana, 184_

as the silken night
draws the breath
from my mouth, i remember
my first encounter with you.
as chill as the darkness now
rupturing the light
coagulating on my face and hands,
hands without secrets
palms clear of all the lines of destiny
forsaking change for challenge
and nocturnal kinship.
i remember the dark-skinned plantation night
the endless throb of the cicadas
the bursting fireflies full of illusory light
the soft heat of hibiscus and magnolias
burrowing their scents into my nostrils
as i deliberately sought the silence
of the thickly clustering cypress
weeping with Spanish moss,
their escaping vitality invigorating me
opening wider my eyes / my psyche
until i saw you, there, a thickness amongst
the branches
your pale flesh an infernal glow
flickering among the azaleas.

what unleashed vodun charm
stopped me from turning away
bedeviled me with wanton curiosity
to know what you were.
all the myths of childhood rearing up in my mind,
scooping me up in their arms,
their tight, unforgiving embrace,
demanding i approach you
to whisper the secret words of power
that would release me from my innocence

and you from hunger.
in a rapture of darkness
i allowed your fingers to close
over mine in wordless entrapment
somehow, even then, the cold raged hotly
throughout my system
searing and sealing all the faultlines
of my mortality.
the quarter moon benevolent towards
your caress silently sanctioning
my approaching death.

i remember my lack of surprise
as your two companions materialized
from the chrome green shadows
their bodies seeming to amalgamate
from the density of trees and leaves and vines
simultaneously natural and unnatural
like the albino alligator or midnight blooming
orchid.
their hunger apparent / eager / skilled
their mouths moist and irreverent,
their tongues a moving flame.
boldly, your dark-haired mistress
removed her lace gloves
her fingers flickering over my heated cheeks
and gasping mouth
subtle fingers kneading my lips with sanguine
pleasure / delightedly inserting
the tips into my mouth coaxing my response
and where was my guilt at this illicit act --
my Catholic guilt and fear of damnation -- going
gone as i fell to my knees with her in this primal
garden
sucking on her fingers / falling on her mouth
as i fell from grace
watching her eyes transforming into the colour
of the wildest tropical birds
i had seen outside my window on a summer evening
and all the while, behind her, i heard your satyr's

laugh / your voyeuristic enjoyment.

i remember the formless dissipation i felt as i
raised my gaze to you
the swirling yearning turning to tempests
across my flesh
tales of shipwrecks washing ashore rampaging
through your eyes,
yet still i wanted you
wanted your taste / your structure
your lithe beauty
and so i pulled you down to me
while the others watched in trembling glee,
watched as your fingers sang on my skin
compositions of madness.
slowly, slowly in ever widening curves
the flesh caressed,
watched as you untied the ribbons of my bodice
soothing me with meaningless Cajun phrases,
exposing my breasts to the night.
gently your hands sculpted the raw material
of my body
experience informing every movement,
your serpent's tongue teasing my nipples
with feral knowledge
brushing the dusky cones along
the edges of your fangs
with practiced seduction
suckling and nipping with all the generations of
predators evolving in your blood
and still i wanted more as i pulled your head away
from my slowly cooling flesh
pulled your mouth to mine to explore
your carnivorous desire / the blood-scent
on your tongue and lips,
sumptuous lips full and demanding
your hot tongue invading in probing exploration
pulling at my soul.
for a moment i raised my eyes to look overhead
at the sky's cathedral and whispered

a profane prayer to an angry god,
a lustful sigh for you to go on and on,
for this sublime chaos to never end
for my flesh to blossom under your prideful
gardener's care.

then with an almost agonizing slowness
you slipped my gown from me -- the layers of satin
folding in watery waves at our feet -- an aqua pool
as we drew each other down again into volcanic
depths
forming and melding with each new surge
your fingers pulling apart my secret aquatic
garden,
secret lips communicating through touch
my hastening greed
moistening your fingers with desire
ripe and flush and throbbing
i remember never feeling fear
never stopping to ask where i was going
in this savage landscape,
why i allowed you to compel me to this spiritual
rape.
there were only the familiar calls of night birds
over my head
the almost suffocating rush of jasmine perfume
in the air
as you entered me with a fire colder than any
December,
with an iciness flaming and breathless
and i remember then, thinking about what i had
heard about such couplings with the Devil,
the stories of the unbearable cold lancing through
the womb
but you were not like this,
you were mercurial / unnameable / potent
your rhythmic thrusts carefully calculated as
i withered in your arms / strayed from life
as each new orgasm drained my tenuous reality.

and in those final moments i was tied to you by
blood
the ultimate consummation as your fangs delicately
removed, layer by layer, my humanity
syphoning the rich blood up into your mouth
and down your reckless throat
as i willed away my life with each swallow,
lusting for the unknown / tossed on a fleshy sea
all the centuries callous before me.
and as i saw the red mist begin to cover my
surroundings in mythic disguise,
the scarlet saturating my arms / my fingers
my hands
you grazed one perfect nail across your chest
and offered me your life --
your gift to me to accept or reject
the true communion of the flesh and i took you in
refreshing my cells with this taboo wine,
punctured your skin with my teeth and drank you
down
mewling like a kitten unable to focus on anything
but you and this new hunger
this new and endless reservoir and
i remember, after all of this, as your companions
quietly walked away chatting through the garden
that i raised my eyes once more to your face
and weakly asked you your name,
in whom death was perfected,
and i remember your simple response,

"LaCroix."

TRANSGRESSION

Rome, 15 B.C.

In the thirty-fifth year of my breathing life
Marcellus came for me.

A certain quality of light
infused the Roman sky
as I stood in reverie inside the atrium
of the villa of the poet Marcellus.

I had forsaken my own country of Gaul
to pursue further expectations of power
in the homes of this voracious capital.
Here, there was wealth,
here the on-going acquisition of knowledge and
slaves
was only regarded as an aspect of their various
creeds,
Diana and Venus vied with Jupiter and Mars
for their worshippers' devotion
but I had already been taught the darker precepts
of an older religion,
already knew these gods were only the reflections
of a much too vulnerable humanity
there would be no salvation here from my soon
to crumble flesh
devastated like their finely carved pillars
and lavish marble walls,
there was only one way to open up the centuries
immerse myself in their, as yet, unknown pleasures
as I followed every sunset with a calculated
sureness that my need would be answered,
attended every festival
quietly observing the Vestal Virgins relighting
the sacred fires on Vesta's hearth / the
Ludi -- Florales / the Ludi -- Romani
until the feast of Saturnalia when I finally met

mentor / lover / vampyre.
From the lavender-tinted darkness
near the Temple of Saturn,
I saw him,
a silent predator, his desire shimmering
in the shadows
calling me to approach
the winter fires beginning to mount in his eyes
and he was beautiful --
with his raven hair trimmed in Roman fashion,
his alabaster skin as fine a treasure as any
imported from the East
and so I approached him with uncloaked senses,
extended a hand to touch his yearned for coldness
and hold it over my heart
knowledge surrendering to knowledge
a willing sacrifice to the Lord of Misrule.

Nearby the braziers are being lit
with aromatic herbs as I watch again
the sun god stumbling
into the face of the night
his flaming robes desecrated with
funereal purple and ashy grey.
The harsh voices of the slaves reaching even here
as they prepare for another evening's feast,
food for the pen, but I am restless with waiting,
my tunic an irritant against my skin,
my eyes suddenly sore from the stray kitchen smoke
now is the time
now
as I turn to see Marcellus intruding upon
the garden's innocence with his savage radiance
my body explosive under his gaze.

Even through your cruelty
there is still innocence,
the innocence of finalities.
You believe you can control
the gods -- but there are none,

this you will learn in the
void.
You ask to become kindred,
LaCroix so that you can
experience fully the epiphany
of the kill
but this is only asking for
your own unending cycle of pain
the pain which you claim to
cherish so.
Look at me, Lucien,
look to your own future
what you see is but a corpse
a revenant baffled by time,
all the days are lost,
all the nights a blurred
blood-vision
animated by a mechanical
awareness of human life
and yet you still pursue me
pledging fealty
if only I will destroy your
mortality
if only I will exchange
secrets with you -- immerse you
in death and its chill glamour
sucking on your temporary heat,
your temporary heart.
Even as we speak
your eagerness for power
has raised a sweat on your
polar brow
the moonglow pinpointing the
daylight in your eyes,
the unhesitating blue.

Then come, lift up your eager
lips to mine --
that sumptuous, summer mouth
for a kiss

concluded in the darkness
of this portico
under the false Pantheon's
dome.

FOR LUCIEN AT CHRISTMAS

Winding the gold garland
around your bare arms / your bare thighs
rubbing your flesh
with frankincense and myrrh
you are transfigured by death and resurrection
the solstice ritual complete
your body purified as, again,
i re-consecrate you to the sun.

BOOTS

From across the room
the first thing you noticed were the boots -
companion to your blood.
the deep burgundy velvet crooning in your ears
arousing your craving
for the curve of instep
precariously balanced on your palm,
your fingertips deliciously drawn
through the nap / nuzzling the fabric
exploring the bondage of taut laces.

Lucien, undo the cords,
allow the fantasy,
slip the shoes off the naked flesh
stroking and simpering
over the perfectly exposed white foot
the instinctual need for nourishment and sex
inescapable.
i wait for that first rush of fulfillment
as your fangs bite deeply into my pale
and delirious ankle.

DIALOGUE

Cumbria
Winter 1230 A.D.

Nikola, I'm so cold
where is LaCroix
where are his promises now?
each of us, eagerly

coveting our own captivity,
has permitted him this
with our promised flesh
and sacrificed free will.
I'm afraid, Nikola
afraid of abandonment and the true death.
reach out to me and hold me
defend me against the coming light.

the cell is small.
masquerading its dampness
with tapestries glorious with war
clutching the walls
in whimpering gasps of scarlet and black
an uneven flagstone floor,
its parent the castle bedrock,
pierces the bottoms of their feet
drawing the blood / denying the healing
and hunger,
its divine edge stinging their throats
slashing their stomachs
with sanctified retribution, holds
them in trembling thrall.

I, to, am afraid Jeanette
of his dark passion and his punishment
but he is now our father
and we are truly his children.
our eternal redemption
bound up by his damnation
as we re-enact evil at his whim
covering each mortal conquest
with an aching confusion.
I, to, bury my guilt at each of his smiles,
the icy stroke of his fingers along my palm,
the illicit joy of denying death
safe passage through my body.
he has allowed us this temporary life in death
and we gladly accepted

the fires of self - delusion blazing
too brightly in his eyes / destroying rational thought
and so we wait for a greater conflagration,
another conversion
condemned by a misdemeanour
an act of defiance against our Master
as the dawn begins to burnish the outside walls
with its fatal blushes of rose and crimson
its appetite predictable
its desire for our flesh irrevocable.

NOVEMBER

In the Cocoon

above me, a dwindling winter sun
washes its light through contorted branches
an echoing, lute - song of transparent harmonies,
one faultlessly layered over another,
transmitting the frailty of the Season
to my severely wrapped flesh.
this is the metamorphosis you spoke of,
this acceptance of a sea - change within nature
when nature turns
its cloven hoof from the dance of autumn
to the secret refinement of mourning.

jostled by a sudden wind
i shift restlessly on the wrought - iron bench
momentarily caught in its maze - like pattern
of roses and briars / its fairytale allusions
and i am chilled by its timely reminder
of my own forthcoming awakening,
the promised exchange of blood.

memory taunts me with vision
my blood staining your full lips,
the discriminating movement
of those long fingers drawing towards your mouth

to sensuously remove the lingering drops of
my willing blood.
those pallid, sky - drenched eyes constantly
monitoring my expression / measuring my surrender,
yes, with you
there must be surrender / quick and unquestioning
your patience as long dead as your mortality
your nature demanding possession / obsession
or true death.

Lucien, i am already yours
although i have yet to drink from your sacred wounds.
the texture of your moonglazed skin
under my fingers / the cool slipperiness
like rare, rose - veined marble,
haunts me with ghostlike intensity
the spectre of passion in which i did not believe
until i encountered you,
you and a subterranean world of demons
as natural now

ON THE EDGE OF A KISS

Nicholas, drain me
in this lusty darkness,
in this room clamorous with stars,
their artificial whiteness
burning in the royal blue dome overhead.
i can sense your daemon
rampaging beneath your skin,
rippling the flesh with hunger
and your will torn
by encroaching mortality and immortal need.
Nicholas, Nicholas reach out to me
so that i may overcome your illusions
with palpable proof of your viability,
your mythological heritage.

LaCroix understands.
he resolved this dichotomy of spirit
when he accepted his own conversion in Rome,
his own passage into The Blood.
even now as i caress your cheek
and lift the golden strands of hair
off your forehead
his blood converges with yours
commanding obedience / commanding your desire
and your desire is great, Nicholas,
your position in the hierarchy of death, clear
you are a killer / a seducer
a reclaimer of souls
re-born to destruction
your natural beauty a lure.
now, quivering on the edge of a kiss
i have come to claim you as my mentor
your tutelage promised to me
by your own dark master
who understands your weakness,
who understands the limits of temptation.
immobilized, you watch me
raise my wrist to my own mouth crudely
puncturing the barrier of skin
exposing the first few drops of thickening blood
to fall on your lace cuffs
ruining your immaculate linen.
is this enough for you, Nicholas?
this blood-letting freely given
for a few moments of weakness
as i exchange one life for another
and you declare again to whatever gods you once believed in
your ultimate defiance of their laws.

ah, i see now that darkness will triumph again
as your eyes shift from summer blue to autumn gold
your fingers composing into talons,
the carnal growl rising in your throat
as you accept again that the savage pathway to the blood
is your only clear and constant light.

STEALING LACROIX

this is the madness of blood
calling to blood
a virulent obsession to ingest your fluid,
secret and alone - to turn into a ritual
the drinking down of your blood
stolen from your veins
as you sleep in a porcelain death
cold and unmoving
your eyes closed / your hands stilled
victimized by a mortal's curiosity
to take from you what you so often impose,
your curious gift of death and bondage.
i have seen where you sleep, LaCroix,
lying prone on your bier wrapped in black velvet
the expected candles at head and foot
their quivering flames the theatrical touch
you could not resist
as you rest, oblivious in your arrogance,
to my intrusion.
i came to you in worshipful silence, LaCroix,
the holy instruments of syringe and vial
burning their silver litanies across my hand
as i prepared you for sacrifice
the many rehearsals i had played out
finally at an end.
at first i was shy / hesitant
to touch you, almost afraid
that you would waken to my apprentice's touch
and laugh at my attempt
to harvest your life-force before you took me
to death,
but you did not stir / the candle flames
droned on and on until, at last,
i removed the sacred unguent of belladonna and
mandrake
and rubbed it into the creases of your mouth
lusting after you

with each precise stroke
but denying myself the revelation
of your seductive caress.
touching the mixture to each of your eyelids,
i then sought the vulnerability of your ashen wrist
in exquisite homage i turned it up to face me
and with reverence, genuflected,
before i placed my moist mouth
against the faintly rhythmic pulse
kissing the blue tracery below your skin
for a moment tasting the folds of flesh
against my lips
reluctantly i released you,
submerging my necrophilia to accomplish my thievery
how easily the needle punctured
your flesh, its slender rigidity
invading your vulnerability.
the tomb meditated in protective stillness
as i watched the searing red slowly
ease its way up the shaft
the colour the same as any other
the texture thick and lush
i watched as you disappeared
up into the glass cylinder
all of your history / all of your power
and i felt the frisson of excitement
exploding uncontrollably along
my bare arms and the back of my neck
now, i would become your confidante,
absorbing you without becoming your slave,
able to manipulate the silken thread of intimacy
between us at my desire.
with great care, i wrapped the implements
in a square of shot silk dyed the brazen hues
of an autumn sunset,
closed the door
and left you behind
as the chimes of a far-off clock
counted off the beats of an imminent dawn.

midnight.
a time the Celts fear the most
neither yesterday nor tomorrow
an unconsecrated limbo
barred to both angel and demon
a time of choice / a time for mortals
but i have already chosen,
made the decision to cross over into death
dragging its allure into my breathing days.
the silver and gilt chalice
stands warming by the hearth
the orange glow picking out the patterns
of intertwined letters / intertwined beasts
their mystic union changing
in grotesquerie with each sway of the flames.
this is my grail,
and you are my treasure / a frisky jewel
uncovered, the mysteries of the earth
informing your intuition.
tipping the vial into the goblet
the blood drips slowly blending
with the honey mead and spices
churning in the bottom.
lifting the glass to my lips
i pause in time
shutting my eyes / drowning my senses / immobile
as the warmth from the fire
douses my skin with its skilful reassurance,
the brocade sleeves of my tunic
encasing my arms in a clinging embroidery,
rub loose threads against my skin
in an irritation both annoying and arousing
and the silence throbs insistently in my ears
reminiscent of waves breaking against a well-worn shore
the first few drops flow out then coalesce
into a steady stream, heady and potent
the taste of your blood is strong - sweetened by the honey
but still laced with a bitter undercurrent of smoke and ashes / convoluted and alive
each mouthful different from the last.
the liquid adheres to my tongue and teeth

the stickiness cloying, almost suffocating
in its intensity, imprisoning
my mouth and throat.
are these the first rushes of conquest?
dancing on the edge of dread and desire,
i am drawn into the vortex of your sensibilities
inducted into your mystery.
the cup drops from my fingers
and rolls unseen under a chair
as i mentally chase the liquid fire rampaging
through my veins.
my body is crushing my soul, LaCroix,
with parasitic ferocity / the arteries
expanding and contracting in hectic terror.

no control - I HAVE LOST CONTROL

as a vision of you rises, unbidden, to my
unfocused eyes
feverishly i call out your name - Lucien -
blindly stretch out my fingers
to touch your diabolical beauty / your
translucent presence and wait
for the blood spasm to end,
for you to accept me as your acolyte.
the poison has grafted itself to my cells
and i have succeeded in your capture,
your internalization - and now i know your rage
and your pain
forgive me, Master,
for my misinterpretation / my treason
my pride
through all my imaginings
i could never have understood the pain of the angels
could never have understood your dark light, Lucien
for you are just this, a fallen seraph
betrayed
and abandoned to the earth.
your blood is a troubadour / an oracle
re-creating each story, each sensation, each century

as my heart circulates your tales through
my body and my soul
and i shall answer you with song and bloodied mortals
as i return to the night,
as i return to you.

THE LIE

each crucifix i put on is a lie
my flesh doesn't crave protection
it desires violation / harsh and breathless
slipping the leather cord over my head
the wooden cross hangs guarding my breasts
solid and implacable, smug in tradition
the next layer is Celtic silver - delicate filigree
joined to crystal and garnet and onyx,
deceptive beauty suffused with a Catholic correctness
and finally, a small gold cross -
sundrenched / sunladen
touches my throat in a seductive whisper
the continuous lessons of denial,
but sin excites me and daylight no longer offers
me any promise.
my eyes close in a reverie of longing grown too familiar, longing
to escape this convent and come to you.
i have heard your name whispered during Vespers
irrational giggles teasing the silence
with their forbidden staccato / the reverent air
disturbed by fully - blown innocence.
they have seen you lingering in the garden
a patch of shadow darkening the lilacs
and i have heard them describe your unnatural
pallor and feral eyes as we lay in the dormitory,
feigning sleep / exploring our own bodies
visiting nightly a swelling purgatory
unable to consummate our soaking loins
until the morning, chastised in prayer

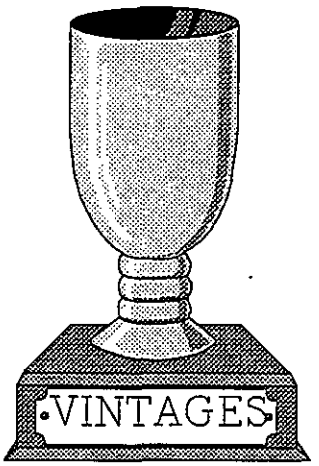
the holy perversion.
this is no longer enough -
none of tme has come looking for you, but i shall,
i shall cross the throbbing threshold and wait
for you to find me
under the sweating moon
where greed and expectation
shall find each other and meld into a smouldering
union
the archetypal darkness bitten by the light.

a hush
the almost imperceptable closing of a gate
and you are there - a radiance casting a lunar glow
agains the parti - textured stone walls
smoothing and healing their irregularities
with your luminosity.
here, Lucien, here, my love
here is highly - strung virginity refined
through many cloistered nights
i am not afraid of the dark,
i invite your passion.

what is this?
the unmistakable siren call of an
innocent
tickling my mind with her resolve,
confusing lust with freedom.
her slender fairness attracts me
my hunger not yet sated this night
her bloodcall demands attention -
can I be any less the gentleman?

beyond the human capacity for sight
you have willed yourself to my side,
a naked flame sheathed in black.
extending my hand to your cheek

i boldly commit to my want, as you turn
the palm up to your lips
and kiss the ravenous flesh / your tongue
slowly extending along each of my fingers
licking the salt and cooled sweat.
beyond understanding i know you are testing me -
yet who is the victim here?
for i shall not let you go
back to oblivion condemning me
to wander the unlit hallways of the nunnery,
the unlit halls of memory.
obeying your command i slowly strip off
these artificial layers of sanctity
first - my fingers twine through the supple
leather thong, reach up over my hair and cast
the cherry wood cross down to fall at my feet
next i greedily tug at the clasp of my silver chain
until, it to, lies in a tangle of scarlet and ebony
discarded with the blessed wood
and lastly i remove the gold / remove the metaphor
so that i may stand before you
bared of all pretense / dripping in surrender
as you grasp my hands in yours
and open my vision to an unending expanse of blue



*** * * David Gracey * * ***

"I never drink wine."

What kind of blue-eyed, blond comes to a Con Party and turns down the free drinks? I ignored him, more important concerns to occupy my time, y'know?

It's Saturday night and Toronto is hosting its first "Media- Vampires Con", but things are kind of quiet. The Guests of Honour are none other than the stars of a vampiric cop show called **FOREVER KNIGHT**. It seems really popular, but I'm new to all this, so maybe I'll get the inside scoop on the goings on from some of the F.K. regulars? I'm told the party's upstairs, so I think it's time to relocate.

There's Garnett Ste. Croix in gold and black, reading her poems of lust and blood. Gabrielle Sinclaire just stalked by mumbling something about LaCroix not being himself tonight. Like who would he be?

Ashtara is near the door, handing out boxes of Oatmeal Crisp to buyers of the official F.K. T-shirt. It's the one that reads "Real Oatmeal should be thick enough to stop Fangs".

Before I leave the hotel I have to stop by the Dealer's Room and buy a few things to take back; there are some photos of the F.K. cast and lots of zines. I hope Wolfe-Heart has a new story in one of them. The kinds of things she has her characters doing with and to each other ... Well, it's certainly educational. Sort of explains that old song that went "East coast girls are hip...". No matter, I'm sure it was before **your** time.

Back in the lobby I spot my opportunity, the once in a lifetime type that makes you toss caution to the winds, if you know what I mean? At a secluded table in a dark corner near the Dealer's Room, The Master Himself puts the finishing touches on a display of choice bottles from his private stock. Above HIS head is a dark banner with a cloaked figure stitched in silver

thread. Would HE talk to us about his vintage collection? I'd really like to find out more about some of the choice regions, robust bloodlines, and great vintages. A taste test with The Master and Gabby would be terrific ... if I can just get them together ...

... 99 Bottles of Wine on the Wall ...

"So, this is where you've been hiding," Gabrielle purred as she slithered up to her silver-haired Master.

From my vantage point a few feet away, I couldn't miss the smirk that flitted across The Master's features. Any more than I could not notice the two arms that wrapped around his waist as the red-haired beauty snuggled up to his back. HE must have known someone was watching because those icy blue eyes speared me with a look that made me question the wisdom of approaching him for an interview of **any** kind. Still, when his eyebrow rose in silent enquiry and he didn't appear inclined to tear out my throat, I made my move.

"LaCroix!"

"Do be still, pet," he requested softly, his tone mildly bored but amused nonetheless. "You're distracting enough as it is."

"You tend to enjoy my distracting talents," she replied.

I still hadn't seen her face, but the voice was enough to send a tingle through **my** body. HE laughed at her, and seemed to remain immune.

"And what can we do for you?"

I was busy scanning the labels, dates, regions, etc. on the array of bottles displayed before me.

"Care to talk about this?"

The silence was a little unnerving. I finally looked up and met his rather piercing gaze again. Behind him, the redhead was getting restless, so were her hands. He caught them before she could really get her exploration underway, and I realised the problem wasn't going to be getting them together, it might be more troublesome to keep her off him long enough to answer a few questions.

"You look tasty," Gabrielle murmured a minute later when she gave up and disengaged herself from The Master.

She perched on the edge of the table and gave me a thorough once over that reminded me of the warm fuzzy feeling I'd experienced before HE'd spoken to me. That was the best opening I could hope for. I smiled at her, leaned forward, and uttered that single word that drives anyone nuts: "Why?"

The Master was snickering to himself, and she was staring at me like I'd been dealt a few short.

"You're serious, aren't you?" she asked with a huge grin.

I probably should have been worried by the gleam in her grey eyes, but what the hell ... This was a once in a lifetime opportunity, it was worth the risks.

"She has a penchant for things British," The Master muttered, laughter adding a lighter texture to his normally hypnotic tone.

"And you can tell -- "

"That you have British blood in your veins?" HE inserted. "Of course."

"Yes?" What else could HE tell? Personally, I assumed that food was food. Evidently, The Master's **companion** also knows what she likes; how delightfully novel, being checked-out as if I were a snack.

"A taste for things British? I'm mostly Celtic, but I've some British in me to be sure. I've heard it said that British blood is rather thin, but a touch of the heather improves the blend."

The **Redhead's** taste for things British reminded me of the first time I met her Master; it was in Devon during Cromwell's war with our dear King.

> For 350 years, I've paid for that rash, thirst quenching drink from the Swinebrook River near Devon. Cromwell's proud, pure Roundheads had attacked a troop of our King's Cavaliers. A brief, bloody battle and the river ran red with zealots' blood. As I stopped at the river to quench my thirst, one of Cromwell's own cursed me for a ravening beast and tried to skewer me. I removed his head with my good blade, ending his curses, but not before he bit me. Pleased I was to see Cromwell's zealots brought down, a fitting end for those sour killers, but now and then, I find that silver is a torment to me.

I do believe that someone mistook me for lunch then as well. It's just too utterly amusing, but I wish **He** would feed them regularly ... it would be less distracting.

The hairs raised along my arms and up my neck as a tasty young Goth passed by; she must be wearing some of that silver the Goths use for jewellery. Some things still get under my ... damn, mind's wandering.

"LaCroix, you've raised your standards since we last met ... how nice." I ignored the faintly contemptuous smile he cast my way and turned back to the lady who continued to stare at him with pure adoration. "Come, come, introduce me to your **companion**. I've heard so many things about her; it will be interesting to learn if any of it is true."

"Gabrielle," he supplied silkily.

"Gabrielle? How charming. I hope you enjoy the Con. Have you met the guests as yet? I've heard that most of the women here think one of them in particular is quite the tasty Britdish type."

"That Guest Of Honour is a passing acquaintance, and he is most definitely a delightful

dish," she assured me with a coy smile. "I fully intend to join him for a drink before the weekend's over," she added.

LaCroix's eyebrow rose, but he made no comment to that little surprise. I couldn't decide which man I felt more amusement for, the unsuspecting British snack, or the Master who'd have to live with the aftertaste.

"LaCroix, I promised to write the official Con Report for the FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA newsletter, and **you** can be my first feature piece. I'm sure the fans will adore you. Tell us about your Vintage collection, please."

The redhead rolled her lovely grey eyes and couldn't seem to decide which of us she wanted to glare at. She tapped LaCroix's shoulder and waited. He laughed quietly and turned to face her.

"You're going to give this guy an interview?" she snapped.

"I hadn't decided," the Master answered with a smile.

"LaCroix, you promised me your undivided attention this weekend. I want it!"

"I've never known you **not** to want it, pet," he retorted with a raised eyebrow.

She snarled at him. It was delightful! Fangs bared and eyes glowing, the lovely creature looked about ready to tear his throat out.

LaCroix's smile slipped noticeably and I wondered about bloodshed in the lobby when his hand encircled her neck and he leaned closer to her. Instead of fear, the implied threat seemed to excite her further -- not that it took a great deal of prompting, of course -- the affect HE has on women ...

"Why not find one of the guests, and enjoy yourself for a short while?" The Master suggested with a noticeable edge of sarcasm texturing his quiet voice.

She surprised him by giving it serious consideration. Gabrielle stared upward, sighting eerily on a specific row of balcony doors on the top floor. She shook her head after a moment.

"They're all asleep," she sighed with seemingly sincere regret. "Besides, I'd rather stay with you."

LaCroix kissed her thoroughly and she all but purred like a kitten when he turned his attention back to me a few minutes later. I had the distinct impression she wanted to curl up at his feet.

"Why don't we go to the bar, where we'll be more comfortable?" he decided, and gestured toward the shadowed room across the lobby.

Shrugging, I followed them.

We found a subdued corner, and I'll be damned if she didn't sit at his feet as we settled into armchairs that were placed next to an artificial fireplace. Gabrielle grinned at me, and rested her head on his thigh. LaCroix absently toyed with her hair, his expression reminiscent of a master and his favourite pet -- an entirely accurate analogy, I reminded myself seconds after the thought formed.

"Shall we start?" he asked with cool politeness.

I leaned back in my chair and pulled out a pen and notebook. This was undoubtedly

going to be very interesting. I mulled over a beginning point, couldn't really come up with anything that I felt was appropriate, so I rattled off the first question to spring to mind.

"What regions are best?"

"I've always been fond of the Romans; I spent my early years there ... "

His smile was enigmatic, and I made a mental note to get back to that particular revelation. He continued to speak and I dashed off notes.

" ... They are full-bodied with lots of character and they keep well."

"What were the 'good old years' and why?"

"It's not the year that's important, 1918 and 1758 were not significantly different ..." He stopped speaking long enough to cast a wickedly lewd glance at Gabrielle. "My pet is a recent item, but unique in flavour, depth, and range of emotion ..."

Her laughter softened his smile, and I was again left with the feeling that my presence was interferring with the Tramp's plans. LaCroix's voice pulled my attention away from his companion.

"... Those things make a great vintage, but I'm not going to bottle her ... yet."

Gabrielle's grin bore a striking resemblance to a leer when she gazed up at him.

"You'd miss me too much," she interjected.

"Some parts more than others," he conceded in a whisper.

"LaCroix?"

He speared me with those cold blue eyes again, and I feigned immunity to the chill he probably felt run through me.

"The 'good old years' refers to the lost vintages; races that have died-out. Hence that old saying 'the blood is always better in someone else's collection', as it were."

Interesting ... I silently mused.

"Are mixed blends a good thing?"

He thought about that one for a few minutes before answering.

"Blends improve an indifferent stock. Canadians are a good example of blending, and blending, and blending ..." He gestured idly with his free hand -- the one that wasn't lost in the immense tangles of his pet's copper hair.

"How do you feel about additives?"

"Smoking can do some truly novel things to a light répas. Still and all, Timothy Leary was an all time high in my '60's collection."

"What have you got for a nice lite snack?"

He laughed, clearly genuinely amused by that query. I saw the same humour reflected in the redhead's eyes.

"Something lite ...?" He was actually stumped for an answer, truly amazing though that might be.

Gabrielle's beaming now, and I realise it's time for a change of topics, before I stumble onto something I really **don't** want to know about -- with these two, who can tell, right?

"What is the scent of a vintage?"

"Warm, pungent and spicy, I enjoy a trace of the salty Maritime bloodlines. Cornwall, Eastern Canada, and Massachusetts are all delightfully tangy."

Why do I know the Slut has the ocean in her blood? I hesitate, then figure, what the hell? Nothing to lose, right?

"Is it true, what they say about East Coast girls?"

"Ah, yes. Perhaps my **pet** will advise you on that last question."

Gabrielle's delicate eyebrows rose and she focused on me with an intensity that was mildly unnerving.

"What **have** you been listening to?" she asked softly.

"Gossip, there's always plenty to go around," I assured her.

"I've noticed," she commented dryly. "A good deal of the more colourful items seem to be about our esteemed guests. They suffer abuse in quantities similar to my Master."

"You're off topic, pet," LaCroix reminded her.

She shrugged. "Perhaps, but it is a point I felt needed to be addressed, ma bien-aimé."

"East Coast girls," I repeated.

"The Beach Boys had it right," she winked.

Before I could formulate my next question, she turned her back to me and faced her chuckling master. Her hands rested on his knees and I waited to see what would happen next -- perverse fascination is one of my weaknesses, what can I say?

"LaCroix," she murmured seductively. "I've been patient and I haven't hurt your friend. Now, can we please enjoy ourselves for what remains of the night?"

"I was enjoying myself, Gabrielle," he corrected, the tone clearly a taunt to her infamously short temper.

She didn't take the bait.

"Then **I** will take what I want to enjoy myself," she promised in a voice that was equal parts threat and thrill.

"Do you have what you need?" The Master asked me over her head.

"Does it matter?" I replied.

LaCroix looked at the restless woman who was slowly crawling into his lap.

"I don't think so," he admitted with a laugh.

When I left them HE was entwined in masses of auburn hair and pale limbs. I wondered, idly, how long it would be before the management threw them out for indecent behaviour? What the hell, I had my interview -- all I have to do now is figure out a way to make it sound remotely believable!

A WOMAN'S GIFT

by

Tracy L. Essam

LONDON, ENGLAND: Summer 1020 ---

"Go to him, chéri," the tall blond man whispered to her.

Janette turned to look through the crowded pub at the one he had chosen. She saw 'him' immediately. He caught her eye and in an instant they knew each other for what they were -- predator and prey. She slowly moved to him, never letting her eyes leave his.

Janette was a beauty, tall and graceful, one would never doubt her nobility. Yet, something in her eyes revealed that she was more.

This man intrigued her. He was tall and dark, and his eyes held man's secrets; secrets she would know before she did what she must, or before he did what he came for. For the time it took her for her to cross the room, the crowd disappeared and it was only them.

The blond man watched the two and smiled. *'Ah, chéri, you will do what must be done for us to survive.'*

Approaching him she asked, "Will you walk with me? I find the atmosphere in here a bit too stifled and I need some air."

"What of your companion?"

"He is settled and I don't wish to trouble him."

"But you wish to trouble me, a stranger?"

She was not used to being questioned. This man was getting to her in a way that she did not really mind. "Only if it is no trouble," she quipped.

He smiled and nodded. It was only then that she stopped to truly look at him. He was not overly handsome but there was something about his eyes that intrigued her. In the way they lit up his whole face, turning it from a rather plain masque to a work of art. Standing up to his full six feet, he took her by the elbow and guided them from the noisy pub.

"Nice evening," he commented as he looked up at the star filled sky. "But that isn't what you came out here for, is it? I suspect you, being what you are, have seen many nights

of this calibre."

Janette turned and faced him. "So, you are the one who has been following us," she challenged coldly.

He raised an eyebrow. "Did you for a moment doubt it?"

"Then why did you come with me, if you knew what I wanted?"

"A weak heart, by dear lady. Although my brain tells me differently, I cannot conceive that a woman of your beauty could hurt anyone."

"Flattery?"

"Truth. I can see in your movement the air of nobility, and in your face the look of innocence lost. Your hands have not seen work, showing that you want no part of it."

"My hands?" she whispered, and looked down at them, examined them critically. "The last man to compliment my hands was the Sultan of Albadul, he thought he could own me like the rest of his hareem. These hands are the last thing he saw as I strangled him until he was almost dead, and then I drained his body of blood. Then I left him scorned, tied up, dressed in a woman's gown. These hands have held a dagger inches from a man's neck, while my ears listened to his pleas for mercy until I grew tired of hearing them. Then I slit his throat ear to ear and drank his blood. These men scorned me as a woman, and I paid them in kind. I could have taken their blood without so much pain, but I wanted them to suffer." She paused a moment, still inspecting her hands, lost in the past.

The man watched her tell her tale, talking as if he wasn't even there. His mind screamed out for him to slip away while he still had a chance. But something stronger told him to stay. He had to try and get what he had come for.

Janette took in an unnecessary breath and let it out shakily. "Yet, these hands have also helped bring babies into the world, they have stroked the hair of the elderly as they lay alone waiting for death." Looking up at the stranger, she smiled. "You compliment my hands, dear stranger, and I take the compliment to heart, for I am not ashamed of anything I have done with them."

"I only meant to compliment your beauty, dark mistress. I did not mean to call forth your past demons. You are bewitching and I could have just as easily complimented your eyes."

She laughed. "Am I equal to the sum of my parts? Is this to be your final discussion? My hands make me a murderer, what do my eyes make me? They are ice-blue. So from this do we determine I am a cold killer? For a woman's eyes should be brown, warm and inviting, n'est-ce pas? Or perhaps hazel, always changing - deceptive. Blue is the colour of a warrior's eyes, or so I've been told. Cold and unfeeling. Never allowing the enemy mercy. These are the eyes I have, and perhaps rightfully so, for mercy is not the way of a warrior, and it is also not the way of a vampire."

The man's eyes widened as he saw fangs emerge between the slightly parted scarlet lips. Every part of his brain screamed at him to cry out, but still a part of him resisted. "If one is to argue that you are the sum of your parts, then you must take into account that the hands that you feel label you as a killer have also brought life into this world. And your eyes, they have

seen many wonders throughout the years. Your fangs are the final chapter in a mortal life. You call yourself a cold killer -- I call you a Goddess."

As Janette drew closer, the man realised it was too late. He was going to die. As she pulled his head forward, she whispered, "Then why have you been following us? Why were you trying to kill us?"

"Because I ..." The rest of his sentence was lost as she bit into his neck. But her mind heard what he had left unspoken. His thoughts had been transferred in his blood.

"My God!"

"Ma chéri," said a mocking voice from the darkness. "It is much too late to ask God's help."

Janette turned to address the voice as her pale companion stepped into the light. "You knew, didn't you, LaCroix?"

Her master smiled. "Of course."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she hissed, glaring at him in fury.

"Because I knew you would react as you are now. Look," said LaCroix, pointing to the body at her feet, "even now you hesitate. You must finish the job, kill him, or he will kill us!"

"You're wrong, LaCroix. I have tasted his blood, he is not trying to kill us -- he wants to be one of us ..."

PARIS, FRANCE: Twenty-five years earlier ---

Janette hurried through the darkened corridors of the brothel. It had been a busy night, but she had managed to slip away. Dodging a potential customer, she ducked through a doorway, into a room where her friend Anna was resting. 'Poor Anna,' thought Janette as she took in her friend's appearance, 'she looks bad. The labour pains are getting worse, she will need a doctor soon.'

"How's business?" asked Anna, gasping in an effort to control the pain.

"Daviaux made me sleep with four men," replied Janette. "I hate him! Look what he's done to you ... Is it very bad?"

"It's my fault. I should have gone away before he found out!"

"What's it like ... this baby?" Janette smiled in an attempt to change the subject.

"You'll find out one day. If I'd found out sooner, I'd still be married and living in England, instead of a prostitute in Paris."

"Then you would be lying down for one man instead of twenty," Janette answered vehemently. "Is it really better? If it's not one master, it's another. At least this way we have each other."

"My husband put me out because I couldn't conceive a child, and Daviaux will put me out because I did!"

"No! He can't!" Janette stated, shaking her head.

"I can't earn my keep like this."

"I can. I can earn enough for both of us ... "

"Then you better get started," interrupted a man's voice. From out of the shadows, Daviaux stepped forward. For all the control he had over his women, Janette could not help thinking how sickly he looked. Not at all attractive, he looked more like a sewer rat than a 'business' man. Grabbing Janette roughly, he added, "If you want your next meal, you'll go where the customers are." As if to point her in the right direction, Daviaux pushed her toward the door.

"She needs a doctor!"

"No, she needs a priest."

"How can you do this? You're killing her!" Janette knew it was too late for her friend, even as Daviaux pushed her out the door ...

"... But she didn't die!" insisted Janette. "When Daviaux took me out of the room and beat me, she managed to escape!"

"I know," LaCroix nodded. "But what does it matter now? You are so much more than you were then."

Janette looked at the barely breathing body lying at her feet. "He's her son. I can't kill him."

"You must! He is part of what you were. You have to leave all that behind to fully embrace what you are!"

"Anna was the one part of my mortal life that I choose never to forget."

LaCroix let out an impatient sigh. "Then make him like us, make him immortal."

Janette looked at the face of the man she'd nearly killed. He looked so much like his mother. She could make him immortal and give to him what she would have liked to give Anna. Bending down she cradled his head in her arms. Exposing his neck, she bit, taking the last of his life. Then, biting into her own wrist, she offered him immortality.

'A new birth,' she thought ironically. *'A woman's gift.'*

THE NIGHT WIND

The night wind howls
Cold...
Relentless...
Pursuing, like a hungry wolf
Tearing at the throat of... Me?
The victim
The hunted prey
The night wind howls
Fierce...
Determined...
Trapping my desperate fear
Feeding on my terror
Consuming me
Drawing me inward
The night wind howls
Wild...
Rising...
Ringing with the cries of my anguish
And the blatant, chilling laughter of... Victory?

Locked in her hellish nightmare, the laughter continued to swell, growing ever louder. Insistent and inescapable, it fanned outward until it filled the room, becoming a presence in itself. Intangible, yet undeniable. The very darkness seemed to press down on the restless woman who tossed fitfully upon the large, moonlit bed. Malignant and oppressive, the blackness

bore down with unconcerned deliberateness, choking her. She fought the suffocating sensation, gasping for the air her tormented body craved.

A scream rose from deep within her, and lodged itself in her throat. The murky shadows began to fall away, gradually becoming dull shades of grey. And the silence was finally broken by her weak, strangled cry.

Her eyes flew open and instantly flooded with reactive tears. The shaking breaths she took dragged air into lungs that ached painfully. Trembling hands rose to push back dark tangles of clinging curls, as she fought for composure that wanted to remain elusive.

Slowly the pounding of her heart eased enough for her to hear beyond it. Then she became aware of the icy stillness of the room. And the sense of a presence that did not belong.

'Nicholas?' Her lover's name formed in her mind, but her voice was lost to her. Indecision and unreasoning terror forbade motion. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to breathe. Steady, calming breaths.

"Theressa?"

The voice was sensuously soft and lilting. And completely unknown to her.

Her blood ran to ice at the unfamiliar sound. Again her vocal cords refused to respond, and dread-filled silence hung in the air around her, spilling into every part of the room as it held her transfixed and terrified.

"Querida mia," the voice murmured provocatively.

The endearment brought a piercing flood of warmth to her numbed mind. She opened her eyes, driven by a perverse mixture of anxiety and curiosity. For a moment, her eyes detected nothing. The air stirred by the open window and the whisper of movement there inexorably drew her gaze. Almost immediately the darkness appeared to lose some of its depth. The shadows dispersed, and he stepped into the pale radiance of the moon's light.

He was tall and thin, dressed in a flowing black cape and clothes that whispered of another place and time. The severe blackness of his dress was broken by the stark white of frothy lace at his throat and cuffs. That contrasting whiteness was repeated in his hair, almost shimmering silver bathed in the glow of the room's eerie light. The softly shorn hair framed a fine-boned, aristocratic face. His skin was milky and had a translucent
quality to it. His mouth was well shaped and generous. The narrow, aquiline nose and high cheekbones gave him an unmistakable hauteur. But, it was his eyes that dominated the striking features. Blue as the morning sky, his eyes seemed lit with twin fires burning within them. And they compelled submission from anyone who looked into their endless depths.

Theressa gasped audibly, totally unprepared for the shocking wave of weakness that threatened to overwhelm her. Deep in her mind she knew she should be screaming for aid. But fear had been dulled by an intense, escalating thrill of excitement.

The pale eyes which held her gaze seemed to be drawing her soul from her. She was unable, (unwilling?), to resist the alluring, intense presence.

"Are you frightened, my Theressa?"

This time she noticed the hint of accent, and ironic amusement, that textured his voice.

He slowly walked toward her, graceful and regal in his motion. As he sat down on the edge of the bed, the stillness eased out of the room's frozen atmosphere. The cry of the wind was no longer muted to her ears. Now its haunted and sorrowful music caught at her heart, evoking an old, not quite forgotten loneliness inside her.

"Who are you?" She heard the small, tremulous words she spoke, yet they felt as though someone other than she had uttered them.

"Your devoted slave, mi amada," he murmured smoothly.

The silky richness of his voice brought a ripple of sensual awareness into her mind. He smiled, a ghost of mocking arrogance in the unfathomable darkness of his eyes. He took her hand in a delicate clasp and raised it to his lips. Instead of the light caress she was anticipating, he pressed his mouth to the soft skin of her wrist. The cool firmness of his kiss raised a wild, searing pang of desire within her. She could hear the fierce pounding of her heart begin anew, but the fear that had paralyzed her earlier was a thing forgotten and distant now.

For a fleeting second she thought someone called her name, and the ecstatic fire within her faltered. She felt confused and disoriented. Almost instantly her eyes were drawn back to the man before her -- and everything beyond him suddenly ceased to exist.

A sigh escaped her lips when his tongue touched the throbbing pulse at the base of her hand, and lingered persuasively there. Her breathing had taken on a ragged edge when finally she reached out to raise the fair head to face her. The blue eyes that blazed back at her were alive with hunger. The force of that need flooded into her eager mind and found itself twinned.

She smiled, an expression suddenly wild with abandon and burning passion. She moved into his arms without hesitation, consumed by the inferno that raged within his eyes. Her mouth opened beneath his as he drew her down beside him. His lips and hands began to move over her with insistent, exploring intimacy. Gradually, he became less demanding. His seduction was slower now, indulgent and skillful. She had never felt such pure, raw hunger for anybody.

Tears slid from her eyes and she almost sobbed as he pulled her across him and sat up. The lacy shirt he wore had been torn open and she pressed herself against the smoothness of his exposed skin. She shook her head in agonised protest when he eased her back. Her breaths were broken rasps now as her eyes begged him to end the exquisite agony he had aroused in her.

For a moment he did nothing. His eyes, despite the fire within their darkened depths, seemed vaguely remote. Then he pulled her close again, whispering soothing words, as though she were a frightened child awakened from a nightmare.

A languid warmth seeped into her mind and she moaned softly. Her lips trailed soft kisses along his neck, and she pressed against him with renewed urgency.

Without warning the hypnotic hold on her mind released her, and the spell of desire shattered. The coldness of death descended on the room again. He jerked her head to one side and the scream that rose in her throat died there as sharp fangs were savagely buried in her soft, exposed flesh. The room careened wildly in her fading vision, and her cries quickly became feeble whimpers. Then they, too, drifted into silence.

Eventually he drew back and her head fell forward onto his shoulder. For long, endless

minutes he held her. Then he rose and very gently laid her back against the pillows. He brushed aside a stray curl and stared at her pale beauty with detached appreciation.

Abruptly, he turned away and began to straighten the disarray of his clothing. Moments later the door to the bedroom opened.

The golden haired, slender youth who entered looked at the woman who was lying so peacefully on the bed. His mouth tightened with barely repressed emotion, then became a hard line.

"She's quite beautiful, Nicholas." Once again the lightly accented voice was coloured with irony and contemptuous amusement.

"Yes..." he whispered in a hollow tone, careful to hide any trace of feeling.

"And such passion... "

Nicholas closed his eyes as the sound of macabre laughter filled the room. As the laughter drifted away, the wind rose again, echoing with his Master's dark mirth. He opened his eyes and crossed to the window. He slammed it shut, blocking out the relentless sounds of the unnatural storm that haunted the night.

Tears blurred his vision but could not obscure the shaking of his hands. He gazed at the dying woman he had so unexpectedly loved. He hadn't loved her enough to refuse **HIM** though. As it had so often before, the price of his own existence seemed to be inexpiable. But he knew, in spite of himself, he would pay it many more times yet...

Emptiness echoes on the wind again
Blowing through the hollow corridors of my mind
Passages filled with cold and frightened whispers
A soul that is devoid of even the promise of hope
A life drained and tormented by despairing tears
The wind whirls in fierce, angry persistence
Searching out the recesses of my lifeless heart
Those haunted by countless deaths
And helpless, shattered faith
The darkness descended so very long ago
How long before I am Blessed with silence?
Freed from the emptiness that echoes on the wind
And tells the world of my cursed existence?

DREAM, NOR REALITY

by

Wolfe-Heart

The Ancient Vampire felt a little strange as he awoke on this particular morning. He had actually called out for Nicholas and Janette before he remembered that his children were gone for the next few weeks. LaCroix tossed aside the feeling of desertion, like the covers of his bed and got up to start his evening. As he looked out the huge window that overlooked the sprawling estate gardens, he saw that a full mood promised that this could be a perfect evening. LaCroix donned his customary black silk wardrobe and headed for the stairs.

As LaCroix exited his bedroom, he was taken aback. At the top of the great stairwell there appeared to be a ball of light glowing enticingly. LaCroix thought this strange but decided that it was nothing and began to descend the stairs. Blind to what was happening with each step, LaCroix entered the vortex and began to move back through time.

LaCroix felt nothing as he continued to walk, until he reached what he thought was the bottom of the stairs. As he materialised from the vortex, LaCroix did not emerge in his own living room, but he instead found himself in the middle of a garden. LaCroix shook his head rigorously.

"What the hell is going on here?" he muttered to himself, yet out loud.

"Excuse me, stranger, but you're standing in the middle of my potato patch," a mild-mannered voice observed.

LaCroix, startled, actually moved out of the way as a rather small peasant with a hoe dug into the ground to gather potatoes.

LaCroix looked around. He was in the middle of a garden, which by all accounts was in the middle of a very scenic valley. As LaCroix surveyed his surroundings, he took note that there appeared to be a great wall surrounding this place.

LaCroix's arm shot out and violently grabbed the peasant, "Where am I?" he demanded softly.

The peasant, neither shocked nor upset at the rough handling, simply announced, "You're in the Kingdom of Nor."

"The Kingdom of Nor? Just what the hell is that?" demanded LaCroix.

"The Kingdom of Nor? Why you must be from very far away if you don't even know of Nor," replied the peasant.

LaCroix's immediate response was a low growl, almost inaudible except to the keenest ears. "Enough is enough! Nicholas and Janette, you end this charade right now! And I mean now!" To reinforce this statement LaCroix stamped his foot on the ground.

"It will do you no good, stranger, for there is no one here in Nor with those names. I think perhaps you should go and have a talk with The Blessed One, The Sage, she knows all," the peasant informed the tall, fair haired stranger. He pointed LaCroix in the right direction.

LaCroix was going to say something else but thought better and headed in the direction of this Sage. LaCroix concluded that this was one wild dream and decided that it could be worse, so what the hell, he didn't have anything pressing on at the moment so he was going to play the game -- for now.

LaCroix, for reasons he couldn't quite define, felt almost comfortable in Nor. His head was clear, which it hadn't been for many a night. He felt, well, relaxed, which was for LaCroix a rather alien feeling. LaCroix caught himself smiling as he breathed in the fresh air of Nor.

What was even stranger still was that no one he encountered was frightened by him. He received no feelings of apprehension from anybody. No one seemed to really care about his presence. They nodded their greetings and went back to work.

Even LaCroix had to admit he stood out among the crowd. For one thing he was over six feet tall with fair skin, short white-blond hair and was in peasant terms, fit as a fiddle. The folks of Nor were short, dark and stump.

LaCroix's all black wardrobe with the flowing cape was a stark contrast to the bright colourful patches of clothing the general inhabitants of Nor favoured. LaCroix walked to the outskirts of the town, and eventually came upon a lone hut.

LaCroix examined the hut. And that assessment, thought the vampire, was being generous. The small dwelling had only two windows that he could see. A small crooked chimney poked out from the end of the roof and a make-shift fence surrounded the place. Rather a dull looking place for someone who was held in such high regard, thought LaCroix. As LaCroix opened the fence to enter, a small, round, dark woman with unkept hair opened the front door.

"So, you have arrived after all," she said. "Well you might as well come in, you who calls himself LaCroix, and sit yourself. Don't be expecting much from this 'Blessed One'."

"I wasn't," LaCroix remarked with sardonic amusement as he entered the hut.

LaCroix looked around at the meagre contents of the hut. "I guess you where expecting a King's castle in here, right? Folks always have this image of 'Blessed Ones' being as rich as the King, when in fact we're, for the most part, as poor as the rest," said the Sage.

"I don't know what to expect anymore," commented LaCroix with unaccustomed, frank honesty.

"So, why come to Nor? You, too, seek out The Sage?" she wondered. The Sage offered LaCroix a cup of brew, as she called it, and LaCroix to his surprise began to drink the mixture.

"What for? I have no idea why I'm here, or for that matter, how I got here. Or, even where here is," said LaCroix.

"Well, you got here through the North Gate. That there one is a tricky one. It doesn't surprise me that you entered through that one," murmured the Sage. "Plenty o' strange folk have only been allowed to enter through that Gate."

"I don't understand," said LaCroix, "don't you know who I am?" "I know what you think you are, LaCroix. But here in Nor you are only LaCroix, and no more." The Sage got up from the rocking chair she was in and went over to the table where LaCroix was seated. She looked into cup of brew which she had offered LaCroix. "I see much pain, LaCroix, inside you. Much torment you have caused yourself and many others. There is much guilt which you carry. So you have come to the Sage, like many before, seeking redemption."

"Redemption!" hissed LaCroix. "I am LaCroix, I need not redeem myself. Especially, I do not seek it from you!"

"Everyone needs to be redeemed LaCroix, even you," shrugged the Sage, unintimidated by the vampire's fury.

"I am LaCroix, I cannot be redeemed."

"Yes, you are only LaCroix, and no more than that."

"I am a vampire."

"You were a vampire. Now you are simply LaCroix."

LaCroix was astounded. He took a long time to take in what the Sage had said and he still do not fully understand. "Where am I?" he gradually repeated.

"For you, LaCroix, it is not so much where you are, but what time you are."

"I am a vampire, time has no meaning to me," said LaCroix.

"Time, LaCroix, is everything to you. For now," said the Sage as she went back to her rocking chair. You are before your time, vampires do not exist in this world."

LaCroix thought for a very long time and was still confused, maybe even more so than before. The only thought that he managed to understand was ironic. Nicholas would be so very pissed off if he knew that LaCroix had been granted what he sought so devotedly for all these years -- mortality. LaCroix decided to change the subject, at least for the moment.

"Tell me about Nor?" he asked.

"Well, what's there to tell? There's that damn well in the centre of the town ... "

"Damn well, is your water not good?" enquired LaCroix.

"No, no, no, the water is fine. Let me start at the beginning. Nor is an enchanted Kingdom. It is surrounded, as you may have seen, by the Great Wall. There are only four gates to Nor. These gates may or may not allow you to enter or leave Nor. No one is sure why, it just is. It has a mind of it's own and the cursed things won't let me out. The Gods know I've tried and tried, but my fate has been to stay in Nor and be besieged by the Nor-folk. 'Oh, great Sage, grant me a kindness, tell me if my crops will grow. Or, Oh, Blessed One, tell me how to make a love potion. Or, Oh Sage, what does my future hold.' All day, all night, I'm consistently being harassed."

LaCroix started to laugh at The Sage for her hand motions were quite comical.

"Yes, go on and laugh, LaCroix! You who sits here before me, not as you were, but

as who you are," she pointed a stubby figure at LaCroix.

LaCroix stopped laughing and smirked. "Tell me more, Oh Great Sage."

"As I was saying, there is a well in the centre of the town. Nor has a spell cast upon it. Every year a 'Blessed One' is chosen. It matters not who you are, anyone can be chosen. When presented to the well, if it erupts, then you're it. If the water does not go up, you're not it. This is a great time for Nor. The Royal family has given birth to a 'Blessed One'. She is a great singer and we've gotten rid of her sister."

"Gotten rid of her sister?" questioned LaCroix politely.

"Yes, a Prince was finally allowed to enter the Kingdom and take that screechy Princess for his wife."

LaCroix laughed as the Sage continued to describe the Princess's vocal abilities.

"So, you're telling me that I can't leave if the Gates won't let me?" LaCroix questioned.

"That's about it," said the Sage.

"Hmmm ... ", was all LaCroix could think to say. After a pause he continued, "You really don't think that I, LaCroix, have come seeking redemption?"

"Can you think of a better reason why you're here?" asked the Sage.

LaCroix could not. Mortality! The thought sickened LaCroix.

"I somehow doubt that you will find me suited to a life of peasantry. I highly doubt that I will be digging potatoes. Let me say, I am rather used to a particular life style, and I am not favourably inclined to a change in it," LaCroix informed the Sage.

"I don't care if you fly Robin's for a living, if the Wall won't let you out, you're staying in Nor," said the Sage matter of factly.

"Why is no one afraid of me?" asked LaCroix. "After all, I am LaCroix."

"You haven't been listening, have you? What should they be afraid of? They know not of vampires and things of that nature. Why they couldn't even imagine a creature of your existence. How else could you be alive in daylight?"

For the first time since his arrival, LaCroix noticed that it was daylight outside.

LaCroix pondered the possibility. People not knowing he existed. Why life as he knew it would be meaningless.

"I think I'd like to try and leave now," decided LaCroix. "Could you tell me where the North gate is?"

"You can't go out through that gate," the Sage told him.

"Why?"

"Because you can't leave by the same gate you entered through. No one ever has. There would be unthinkable consequences."

LaCroix knew all about unthinkable consequences.

"Then direct me to the next gate," ordered LaCroix. He softened his tone with a smile that didn't charm the little woman in any fashion.

"Head west."

"That's it? Head west," snapped LaCroix. "And how pray tell do I get there?" he

continued sarcastically.

"Walk. How else -- fly? Oh, before you leave, shut my door," shrugged the Sage, completely unruffled by his imperious manner.

LaCroix cocked an eyebrow, then rose to leave.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about this redemption thing, you'll never get another change you know?" added the Sage to LaCroix's back.

"I'm quite sure, thank you. If I see Nicholas, I'll send him. I am quite able to live with myself," said LaCroix as he closed the door and headed West.

* * *

LaCroix decided to fly to the West gate and get out of this land as soon as possible. As he stretched his cape into the wind, nothing happened. LaCroix resigned himself to the fact that he would indeed have to walk. He began to contemplate his life.

LaCroix was unable to concentrate much. The beauty of Nor surrounded him everywhere and he found himself easily distracted. He found he was enjoying the walk to the gate. He found the peasants simple yet pleasant people. With no hostile feelings at all directed toward LaCroix. He was being greeted rather than shunned. Maybe there was something to Nicholas' theory after all? For the first time, LaCroix thought he understood Nicholas.

* * *

After the forth day LaCroix found the West gate. The Great Gate towered before him. There was nothing special about the Gate. No great art work adored it. No sign marking it's significance. LaCroix stood for a very long time just watching the comings and goings.

He was also quick to take note that the Sage was right. The gate did have a mind of its own. Since LaCroix's arrival, it had allowed three merchant's entry, but not a visiting Lord. It had also allowed a mother and her five children to exit but not the sixth child.

LaCroix sat on the side of the path and thought for a long time about whether he wanted to leave. It was only when he saw the farmer, with his oxen, pulling a load of potatoes that he decided to give it a go.

LaCroix got up, and low and behold!, he was allowed to exit the city. As the dust cleared from the cart in front of him LaCroix heard a familiar voice.

"Where have you been?" shouted Nicholas, his voice low with anger, but also tainted by relief.

"We've been looking everywhere for you," inserted Janette.

Instead of finding himself in the city of Nor, LaCroix was at the bottom of the stairs, in his great English mansion, being fussed over by his two children.

"Ah, Nicholas," purred LaCroix with a huge, satisfied smile. "Have I got a story for you ... "

NIGHTS PAST

by

Denysé M. Bridger

May 15th, 1723: PIRATE'S COVE, MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.A. ---

Thomas Colby's Inn, 'The Guardian', was the best loved place in the small community of Pirate's Cove. He served the finest ale, employed the prettiest wenches, and was a friend to all who bowed to his domineering personality. His wife, on the other hand, was the source of much ridicule and speculation whispered behind Master Colby's back. William Hamilton had discovered the hard way this night that no one in his right mind said a word about the flame-haired beauty who spoke to no one as she went about her business. He'd tried repeatedly to engage the landlady in conversation, with, he silently admitted, less than honourable intentions in mind for the outcome of the night. Colby had all but run him through for the audacity of his attempt. Thomas had opted, instead, for tossing Hamilton into the rain soaked street, with a loud admonishment not to return any time soon.

Defeated and humiliated, Will gathered reins in hand and was about to hoist his aching body into the saddle when his horse began to snort and fidget. The animal's nervousness was unsettling and he tried to quiet the beast as he peered into the fog.

"Who goes there?" he called out, beyond awareness of the thread of fear that had come into his voice. The night was not a good omen in its own right. The northern town had been besieged by heavy rains and oppressive mists for much of the past week. The eerie atmosphere had begun to wear upon the nerves of even the most stalwart men. Fog curled around Will's legs, the cottony tendrils suddenly cloying and lifelike. Hamilton shook off the delusion, muttering to himself about too much ale.

Still, he hesitated to move. For several moments, Will continued to stare into the milky mist as he stroked the warm flank of his horse and whispered words meant to soothe. The animal reared unexpectedly and Will was flung backward. He slammed into the side of the Inn and watched in dismay as his horse disappeared into the night. With a groan, he climbed to his

feet and was about to venture back into the common room when he spotted a figure emerging from the heavy fog.

Transfixed by the beauty of the woman approaching him, Will lost all interest in returning to Colby's house. The lady smiled and he felt himself grinning foolishly when she held out a tiny, gloved hand. Will lurched toward her. She retreated, lilting laughter drifting back to him, and he followed.

* * *

Colby was just clearing away the last of the debris from the night's revellers when the door to the Inn swung open. A scowl quickly transformed his blunt features into the fierce visage that usually chased away potential customers who troubled him at such late hours. This time, the expression was wasted, however. Three figures came into the common room, two tall men, accompanied by a petite, raven haired beauty. All three were wearing heavy travelling cloaks, and the two men argued softly. The lady tossed her head and frowned impatiently, then decided to greet the Innkeeper herself.

"We're closed for the night," Colby informed her when she came to the bar.

"We have room, Thomas."

He turned at the soft voice of his wife, his expression grew thunderous when he saw her gaze was fixed on the two men who had yet to approach. The curiosity in her eyes infuriated him. She seldom spoke to anyone, and showed even less concern for the people who frequented the noisy tavern. But, something about these strangers had aroused her interest. Jealous resentment rose like a bitter bile in his throat, and his scowl grew when the lady's gently amused voice interrupted his dark thoughts.

"You're very gracious, Madame," the stranger said with a tiny smile. Perfect teeth gleamed snowy white between scarlet lips, and the soft french accent earned her a pointed glare from the man behind the bar.

"We're still closed," he snapped.

"It's late, Thomas," his wife interrupted again. "I'll see to their needs. We cannot turn them away on such a night."

Unlike her husband, Mistress Colby was gently-spoken and courteous. Her entire manner seemed distinctly out of place amid the rough hewn tables and benches, and the smells of alcohol and too many bodies pressed together in the smoky room. The place was all but empty now, yet the air remained thick and heavy with lingering odours and the snores of a few men who were simply too drunk to leave.

"Get about your business!" Colby hissed, furious that she dared to speak to him like this in front of the newcomers. He took a step toward her and raised his hand. She refused to flinch before his anger, and his glower deepened at the lack of fear she showed him. She was always like this, defiant and righteous in her silent acceptance of his anger. Before he could land the blow he had planned, his wrist was caught in a grip that threatened to crush bones. He turned

toward the source of the painful grasp, looked upward, and felt his breath escape in a gasp of fear. Blue eyes bored into him, ice in their depths. Ice, and death.

"Surely you can allow your lovely wife to speak as she wishes," the pale stranger said.

Colby was released as suddenly as he'd been seized, and he stumbled back, oblivious to the crash of pottery behind him when he hit the edge of a serving table. He turned to his wife and roughly shoved her out of his path as he left her to deal with the strangers.

She grabbed the bar to steady herself and closed her eyes for a moment before facing them again.

"Thank you, my lord," she whispered.

The cloaked figure took a step closer to her and touched her chin, tilting her face so he could see her clearly. The lamplight was flickering and growing dim, casting shadows over her. For several seconds he stared down into the delicate features, intrigued by the unsullied beauty in her face. She had wide grey eyes, a full, generous mouth, and high, curving cheekbones. A mane of burnt auburn hair streamed over her shoulders and down her back, the makeshift tie meant to keep it gathered at her neck pitifully inadequate to the task. Her clothes were simple, white cotton blouse and plain brown skirt. Her skin was the colour of ivory, and she smelled of wildflowers and soap. Even the smoke-laden air seemed unable to touch her with its dirt.

"What is your name?"

She shivered at the soft, resonant voice, and her eyes remained fixed on the pale face of the stranger. "I am Gabrielle Colby," she told him. "The Innkeeper's wife."

"I am LaCroix," he murmured after a lengthy pause. "This is Janette," he said, indicating the dark haired woman at his side. "And Nicholas."

Nicholas stepped forward and took her hand, bringing it to his lips briefly as he smiled.

"You're much too lovely to be buried in a place like this," he told her. He'd been shocked by her presence, and the near tangible sense of desertion that surrounded the lady. When the innkeeper had raised his hand, Nicholas had stepped forward. His surprise grew when he'd discovered LaCroix had moved quicker. The master vampire never deigned to interfere in human squabbles -- yet, he had defended this woman. An act totally out of character. Unless, of course, LaCroix already had plans for the man and his wife.

Gabrielle smiled at the compliment and the courtly manners. To their surprise, she accepted the young knight's words and bowed her head.

"Thank you, my lord. I apologise for my husband's ill manner. The day has been very long." It was a weak excuse, but she had no real interest in sparing her husband embarrassment.

"Nicholas is right, you don't belong here," LaCroix observed quietly. Not only was she beautiful, she had a grace that was alien to everything he'd seen of this town in the short time they'd been there. He sensed spirit and intelligence in Gabrielle.

The warmth in LaCroix's voice set off new alarms within Nicholas, and he glanced at Janette. She'd been watching closely too, and it was clear she shared his worry about LaCroix's uncharacteristic gallantry. They'd argued long and heatedly about the idea of taking refuge at

an Inn, but LaCroix would not be swayed from his latest whim. He was a man determined to walk the path he'd chosen, whether it made sense or not. Janette knew well that intentness of personality, she had seen it lead them into many situations which would have been better avoided. The shadow of gloom that had been building around them was suddenly a thing she could sense enveloping them as they stood in 'The Guardian's' common room. The disaster was within this place, waiting for them. She shrugged off the dark musings, tried to deeply bury the premonition, where it could not reach her.

"It's very late, LaCroix," Janette reminded with a tiny smile at Gabrielle. The other woman was staring openly at the vampire, who was returning her look with equal interest. He glanced at Janette, then Nicholas, and nodded.

"I believe you said there was a room available," he stated softly, his tone pitched to a seductive low. Gabrielle nodded shyly and quickly averted her gaze, breaking the spell-like trance that had held them.

"There are two on the west side of the house," she told him.

"Gabrielle?"

LaCroix watched as the sound of his voice affected her like a caress, his expression faintly amused.

"Do you require anything else?" she asked, no longer able to meet his direct gaze. "I can prepare a meal if you -- "

"Nothing," LaCroix assured her. He reached for her arm and her head rose without thought to allow his eyes to snare hers again. "All we will need is privacy. The room must be secure, and dark. We've been travelling for several days and this is our first chance to rest. Do you understand?"

Gabrielle felt the pull of his mind, demanding obedience. It made no sense. Yet, she **could** feel his will overriding whatever answer she might have been attempting to offer. She nodded, unable to do more, then led them up the stairs.

* * *

"You're out of your mind, LaCroix!" Nicholas hissed once they were alone. "This is insanity."

"Would you rather sleep in the cave we were forced into this morning?" LaCroix enquired blandly. He looked around the room, and his face grew thoughtful. Blankets had been placed at the windows, and the door was barred. In the next room, he was certain Janette had done the same.

"Leave her alone, LaCroix. Janette's foolishness earlier may yet reveal us to these people."

"She's different," LaCroix smiled. "You've noticed it yourself."

"She's where she should be," Nicholas replied, though as he spoke he recognised the lack of conviction he felt in the assertion.

"No," LaCroix shook his head. "But, perhaps she will be."

Nicholas bit back the retort that sprang to his lips. He knew better than to waste time arguing with LaCroix. Plus, he wasn't entirely sure the interest in the landlord's wife wasn't simply another way to incite his own temper. Deciding not to say anything further, Nicholas went to his bed and settled in. He felt LaCroix's gaze upon him for a very long time, knew he was still being watched when sleep finally overcame him.

* * *

"Where have you been?"

Gabrielle felt hatred spring into her throat like a vile tasting ale, and she gritted her teeth. "I've been attending to our new guests," she said quietly.

"Aye," Thomas leered. "Fancy folks like yourself. Maybe if you attend that arrogant bastard real good, he'll take you away from all this," he laughed.

Gabrielle heard the familiar slur to her husband's words, and she knew his mood would grow considerably worse before he was through his tirade of insults. She thought about the newcomers, the flicker of longing almost a surprise to her own heart. The men were so fair, and the lady so dark. They were, each of them, so incredibly beautiful. Like the people she used to know, before her father's disgrace had led to his suicide, and her exile.

Her wandering thoughts had made her slow, and she yelped in dismayed surprise when Thomas grabbed her and pulled her close to him. He reeked of ale and sweat, and the filth he refused to wash himself free of, despite her repeated requests. She tried to push him away, but he'd gotten a strong grip on her this time.

"Well, **my lady**, tonight you can attend to me," he snarled. She squirmed in his rough grasp, and Colby clutched her tighter against him. He'd often seen this loathing in her, but tonight it enraged him more than it had for a very long time. He'd seen the look in her eyes when the pale stranger had saved her from the blow she deserved for her defiance. And, it made him furious.

"Let go of me, Thomas!" she hissed, more in anger than fear. When he ignored her words and buried his face in her neck, his mouth hot and rough on her skin, Gabrielle's stomach roiled with revulsion. She pushed at him with renewed determination, desperate to escape him on this particular night. She'd endured his gross violations for most of the past year, and normally she could shut herself away from the humiliation and degradation she felt when he'd force himself on her. She remembered the smiling faces of the strangers, and the respect they'd shown her. It made her husband's disregard even more insulting than usual.

"You'll shut-up, Gabrielle, and be pleased I don't throw you out for defying me," Thomas snarled, his voice thick with growing excitement and drunkenness. He was pulling at her clothes, eager to touch his wife's beauty. Despite his contempt, he wanted her with a depravity that sickened him when he was sober. He'd lusted after this lovely woman for years, never dreaming he'd possess her one day. Her disdain of him only added to his obsessive

hunger for her. A final yank and he had the strings of her bodice pulled loose, he shoved aside the material so he could fondle the silken softness of her breasts.

"God! No!" Gabrielle whispered to herself as she tried to break the hold Thomas had on her. He was being more persistent than usual tonight, and she knew if she continued to fight, she'd pay dearly for the mistake. Somehow, the pain seemed preferable to allowing him to satisfy his lust. She brought her knee up sharply, connected solidly with his groin, and felt the shudder of pain that wracked his body before he staggered back in shock. Fury distorted his features and he was on her again before she could make it to the door.

The world spun away in a swirling void of star-dotted blackness when Gabrielle was thrown into the heavy wooden door of their bedchamber. She tried to avoid colliding with the door, and as her head turned, she took the force of the impact on her right temple. The air rushed from her body in a single expulsion of breath, and she began to slide down to the floor. Before unconsciousness could offer her a sanctuary, Colby grabbed her elbow and hauled her back to her feet. He landed several back-handed blows to her face before he dragged her to the bed and flung her down.

Blood trickled down her throat, making her gag and she tried to rise again. The motion made her entire body scream objection and she fell back, unable to fight any longer. His weight covered her, his skin hot and rough against hers, his hands groping until he had pushed aside her clothing. When he had removed the last fragile barrier, he plundered her body without hesitation. She closed her eyes and her agony shrieked in endless wails within her head. Rage, humiliation and pain mixed together and became a vile knot of hatred buried deep inside her. The sound of Colby's grunting dimmed and she passed out as he went on raping her, oblivious to the fact that she no longer moved beneath him.

* * *

In the upstairs chambers of the West side of the Inn, LaCroix heard the screams as acutely as if they'd been echoing aloud throughout the large house. It was difficult to say which annoyed him more, her intrusion into his sleep, or the reason for her cries. He rose from the bed and was surprised when Nicholas spoke from the other side of the room.

"You should have killed him," the young knight remarked, his voice tight with barely contained fury.

LaCroix's eyebrow rose at the surprising words. Nicholas was usually the first one to object to killing anyone. What had this charming wench done to bewitch them both with so little effort?

"I'm surprised, Nicholas," LaCroix murmured. "This disregard for human life is not at all like you." The older vampire couldn't resist the ironic amusement he felt at the knight's anger. After more than five centuries, Nicholas still held tightly to the ideals that had dictated the course of his life when he'd been mortal.

"Nor is defending a lady's honour like you," Nicholas pointed out, his tone easily

matched LaCroix's.

"It seems this wench has something of a magick even we are not immune to," LaCroix laughed.

"Nickola is right," Janette's voice reached them seconds before she stepped into the shadowy room.

"About what, dear Janette?" LaCroix responded.

"What kind of game are you playing at, LaCroix?" she demanded. "First you insist that we must stay in this... this place," she finished with a disdainful toss of her head. "Then you draw attention to us by interfering -- "

"Be very careful of your words," LaCroix warned softly, his blue eyes like ice crystals glowing in the darkened chamber.

Janette dismissed whatever she had been planning to add, then glared at the older vampire. "You succeeded only in making her life more miserable!" she snapped. "Angering that pig has caused her pain."

"So, you feel it, too," LaCroix mused, intrigued by the revelation.

"It is impossible not to hear her screaming, chéri," Janette pointed out with a wave of her hand.

"We are the only ones able to hear her, Janette," Nicholas interjected softly.

That news clearly came as a surprise to the raven haired vampire and she turned incredulous eyes to LaCroix.

"How can this be?" she questioned, her voice tight with suspicion.

LaCroix shrugged carelessly. "I would guess she has latent psychic talents," he theorized. "Or, we have all fallen under the spell of a witch," he finished with a laugh that made Nicholas smile in spite of himself, while Janette scowled at them both.

Sobering quickly, Nicholas rose and took a step toward the door. LaCroix immediately recognised his intent and blocked his passage.

"This is **not** our business, Nicholas," he warned softly.

"Janette's right, LaCroix," Nicholas retorted savagely, and allowed his anger to surface to his eyes. "**We are** responsible for what she is suffering."

"Perhaps tonight," LaCroix conceded. "But, I would venture to say she has been in this situation many times."

"You appeared more concerned a short time ago," Nicholas hissed as he jerked his arm free of the light restraint of his master's grasp. "Of course, as an active practitioner, you condone rape, don't you, LaCroix?"

"We all have lapses, dear boy," the older vampire commented dryly, ignoring the second portion of the knight's statement. When Nicholas would have left them, LaCroix's hand on the door prevented his departure. "The sun is rising, Nicholas. She is silent now. What, precisely, do you think you will be able to do for the fair lady?"

Janette made an impatient gesture and pushed them both aside. She slammed the door solidly behind her and left them locked in a battle of wills. The winner of that archaic game

was a foregone conclusion, and she sighed heavily as she bolted her door and went to bed.

* * *

The following evening offered Nicholas his first look at the landlord's wife since their arrival. She wore her hair loose as she worked in silence, the long, coppery tresses fell over her face like a curtain she could hide behind. When she stopped at his table, he reached out to take her wrist in a gentle grasp. He heard the sharp intake of her breath as she prepared to object, then it mutated into a stifled sob.

"Please, Mistress -- "

"Gabrielle," she interrupted sharply. "I am simply Gabrielle, my lord."

"And I am Nicholas," he told her with a gentle smile. "Will you sit with me?" he asked when she remained motionless, and didn't look at him.

Finally, she looked up from the floor and met his steady stare. Instead of the smug, knowing leers she had been subjected to all day, she encountered only compassion and sorrow in the blond man's soft blue eyes. Somehow, his kindness was more painful than the boorishness of the other men.

"I am flattered that you wish my company, my lord," she whispered shakily through a blur of tears. "But it would be wiser for -- "

"Gabrielle!"

She actually winced at the sound of her husband's shout, and Nicholas felt his rage spark to life. When he would have risen, she shook her head.

"Please, it will only cause you harm."

Colby left the bar and started toward his wife, his features slipped easily into a scowl of fury. "You'll listen to me when I speak, bitch, or I'll -- "

"You will leave the lady as she is," an icy, dangerously quiet voice advised. "Now, and in future."

Colby stumbled to a halt and stared up at the pale stranger who stood a few feet away from him at the foot of the stairs. The sounds of the common room made the innkeeper foolhardy, and he ignored the vampire's warning.

Irritated, LaCroix allowed the man to turn his back, then fell into step behind him. Colby reached the table just as Gabrielle backed away, her expression filled with misery. She was shaking her head when he made a grab for her, and LaCroix's hand clamped down on the innkeeper's shoulder. Thom's face went pale with the shock of the pain that emanated from his trapped shoulder and continued down his right arm. He turned to look at LaCroix, watery brown eyes widened with sincere terror. Around him, the roar of many voices was becoming hushed as the entire gathering began to notice the drama unfolding in the corner.

LaCroix released the unfortunate man just short of breaking bones, and Colby stared at him. The vampire reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold coin. He tossed it at the innkeeper, who was unable to move. It tinkled softly as it came to rest at his feet.

"My companion wishes to speak with your wife," LaCroix said quietly. "Nothing more. Perhaps one of the other 'ladies' will attend to her duties for the additional payment."

Conscious of the stares and whispers of his patrons, Colby wanted nothing more than to toss this arrogant bastard out into the street. The fact that he could no longer lift his right arm was sufficient reminder of how unsuccessful that course of action would be. He glowered at his wife for another moment, but the wretched whore wasn't looking at him, she was staring up at the stranger who had intervened on her behalf for the second time in less than a day. Choking back his rage, Thomas bent to retrieve the gold, then walked away.

Colby's brooding gaze strayed often throughout the evening. Each time he regarded the three figures at the dark corner table, his anger rose again and he began to plot the vengeance he would inflict on her once they were alone.

* * *

"You should not have placed yourself in danger for me," Gabrielle whispered, afraid now to look at LaCroix as she spoke to him.

LaCroix's laughter, low and warm, pulled her startled gaze back to him. Deep grey eyes seemed to implore understanding, and he took her hand and held a chair for her to be seated. "I assure you, my pet, your husband presents no danger to me," he said, and took a seat opposite her.

Nicholas was watching the vampire, his suspicions becoming more certain when LaCroix continued to hold Gabrielle's awed stare.

"How long have you lived in this place, Gabrielle?" LaCroix asked, as he casually leaned back in his seat.

She started to bow her head, to hide the shame she felt at her appearance.

"Look at me, Gabrielle!" LaCroix ordered sharply. When she flinched, but did as he directed, he softened his expression. "You will never again bow your head to these animals," he told her, sensing the fierce pride that had once been part of her nature. He intended for her to find that small piece of herself again. If nothing else, he would force her to be the strong, self-willed creature he knew she'd once been. LaCroix had no illusions about what a vixen this one might be, in the right hands. He simply hadn't yet decided if his would be the hands she'd fall into. A glance at Nicholas told him the young knight was also drawn to the lady, perhaps more than LaCroix was himself.

"Why does it matter to you?" she questioned, though the glimmer of anger he'd deliberately ignited had taken most of the quiver from her voice. "You will leave here, my lord. It is I who must live with the swine who infest this inn each night."

LaCroix's smile was approving, and his eyebrow rose in amused interest when she tossed her hair back and straightened in her chair. Her spine was rigid, and her chin rose with what he felt was instinctive dignity. The grey eyes that regarded him were guarded, but unmistakably curious.

"You were not born to this life, Gabrielle," Nicholas surmised. "How do you come to be married to an innkeeper?"

"My father was once a wealthy man," she began after several deep breaths. For some reason, she felt compelled to tell them the truth that she'd hidden from all who'd come to know her in this new life. "He married a woman his family did not approve of, and we came to the colonies to escape their wrath. My mother died many years ago. Two years past, my father took his own life. I was told then that we had nothing. His family refused to acknowledge me. They certainly felt no need to help me. I came to work here, when there was no other way to live. Thomas made it clear that I would marry him, or be cast out into the street. He is a harsh man, and these fools fear him. I had nothing. Including a choice about my life."

"I'm surprised you haven't simply killed him," LaCroix noted, his tone bored.

"It has often crossed my mind," she remarked with cool irony. The sound of LaCroix's delighted laughter filled her senses and heat blossomed and spread quickly throughout her body.

"Have you no means of escaping him?" Nicholas asked. Despite the detachment she'd spoken with, he'd felt the depth of pain that laced her words. She had spent most of the past two years in terror, and was truly afraid that it would only become worse now that they had interfered.

"I married him," she replied bitterly. "I belong to him."

LaCroix shook his head, the gesture unconscious, and his ironic look moved to Colby. The innkeeper was watching them and talking to several local drunkards. They were, LaCroix knew, planning an attack on him and Nicholas.

"Nicholas," LaCroix turned to the former knight and his expression was serious. "I believe we have business to take care of before we leave Pirate's Cove."

The younger vampire's eyes narrowed slightly, then he too caught sight of the men lounging at the bar. Before he could offer LaCroix a response, the group's attention was diverted by Janette's flamboyant entrance.

"She is your wife, Nicholas?" Gabrielle wondered, her voice low.

Nicholas laughed quietly and shook his head. The flicker of disappointment he saw come into her eyes confused him -- until her look darted to LaCroix.

"Janette is my... sister," LaCroix murmured, the pause barely noticeable as he chose the lie. She blushed and turned to look at the dark haired lady who was the centre of attention near the long wooden bar.

"She is very beautiful," Gabrielle whispered, her tone sincerely appreciative of the petite woman's loveliness. "You must protect her from them, Monsieur LaCroix. Thomas will think nothing of encouraging them to --"

"Janette is very capable of taking care of herself, Gabrielle," LaCroix assured her. "But, if it will make you rest easier, we will put an end to this."

Nicholas rose and followed the master vampire across the crowded room.

From her vantage point, Gabrielle felt a shudder of pure, icy dread when she witnessed the pleasant smile on Janette's delicate features. The pretty woman was enjoying herself. After

speaking to her, the three strangers left the inn. Gabrielle felt her heart breaking at the realisation that they would probably not return. They had carried very little with them, and Gabrielle wasn't sure they had not already instructed the stable hands to ready their horses for travel.

The noises and smells of the inn were like a suffocating blanket closing over her, and she rose, blinded by sudden tears. Before she could be spotted by Thomas, she slipped from the tavern and headed out into the cool night.

* * *

"I was just beginning to enjoy myself, LaCroix!" Janette snapped coldly.

LaCroix laughed and nodded. "Planning a feast, were you?"

Janette considered the idea as if it never occurred to her, then flashed him a smile that was filled with macabre mischief. "They were making it so very easy, chéri."

"Then we should not disappoint them," the older vampire replied with a smile that revealed gleaming white fangs. "Let the hunt begin," he decided.

Nicholas felt a shudder of revulsion gather near the base of his spine, but it was quickly being submerged by an escalating thrill of excitement. He hated himself for the deaths he caused, yet the hunger was a stronger force than any guilt. LaCroix never lost an opportunity to remind him of that base reality. Hunger gnawed at his insides, and Nicholas shut away his conscience as he slipped into the night behind the ancient vampire.

Janette lingered near the door, making herself the bait for their unsuspecting victims. She called after them and in a loud, theatrical voice she informed them that she would remain precisely where she was, and they could continue without her.

"She's enjoying this," LaCroix remarked dryly.

Nicholas glanced at the other man and commented that she was not alone in her enjoyment. LaCroix's low laughter was chilling.

"They're all such fools, these mortals."

"Including the landlord's wife?" Nicholas wondered.

LaCroix didn't answer him, his smile was filled with satisfaction as Janette strolled toward them, beaming up at her companion.

* * *

The night air was chilly, but for the first time in a week, it was a clear night. Gabrielle gazed upward at the glitter of frost-white stars that dotted the velvet blackness of the sky. There was a stillness to the night that felt vaguely disturbing, but she dismissed it as her own miserable state of mind. She often walked the paths behind the huge, sprawling inn, and had found a lovely, secluded cove less than a mile from her home. She escaped to the sanctuary every chance she could risk. It had been almost two weeks since she'd last ventured to the hidden

place.

She threaded her way through the tangle of wooded growth, her eyes easily picked out the path even within the heavy darkness. The glow of a nearly full moon lit the way with tiny shafts of silver light that filtered through the boughs of the trees. She found the spot she sought a short while later, and smiled with genuine freedom for the first time that day.

Gabrielle went to the edge of the water and sat, the mossy bank soft and oddly warm beneath her. She trailed her hand through the still waters, smiled at the silken feel of the clear water flowing through her fingers. Moonlight shimmered white radiance off the water, and she gave in to the impulse that had brought her here. Standing, she stripped off her clothes and waded into the pool. The water welcomed her, enfolding her as the arms of a lover would, and Gabrielle finally permitted herself to cry.

* * *

Janette continued to lead her unsuspecting victim toward the stand of trees near the back of the Inn. She could feel LaCroix's presence, his nearness an undeniable force. Less intense, but somehow brighter, was Nicholas. They couldn't risk a string of bodies, so they had taken to this form of hunting for the short time they would be in the small village. Janette knew the men she travelled with hated the method, but it was safe -- for the moment.

Charles Peabody was too busy congratulating himself on his good luck to notice that the beautiful woman at his side was more interested in her surroundings than him. Thomas be damned! Charles thought with a smug grin. Let him punish his slut of a wife in whatever way he chose, Charles had his own promise of pleasure to pursue. That thought made him bold, and he stopped their trek into the heavier growth of trees.

"Just a little further, chéri," Janette purred sweetly. "You do not expect me to enjoy our tryst so close to possible discovery?"

"If your companions return, Thom will deal with them," Charles boasted, and tried to catch her in a kiss that would silence the talk. He was more interested in engaging this little flirt in other activities.

"My... brother will not like it if he finds us," Janette teased, thoroughly enjoying that particular lie. The idea of LaCroix defending her honour was vastly more amusing than this poor fool could ever imagine. Still, she didn't object too strenuously when Charles pulled her tightly to him and claimed her mouth in a kiss that lacked any seductive lure at all.

Janette snuggled closer to her victim and laughed softly when he moaned his pleasure and his hips moved against hers. She nuzzled his neck and nipped lightly at the sun-weathered skin. Blood teased her senses and she shuddered with passion her partner couldn't begin to comprehend. Sharp, gleaming fangs emerged and Charles cried out in sudden pain and surprise when Janette's mouth closed on his neck. He tried to push her away, only to find his wrists were now held firm by one of the men who had accompanied her to the Inn.

Terror seized him and he struggled more earnestly in the hideous embrace. He could

hear the soft, sucking sounds of her feeding, and his horror rose as Nicholas stepped into a pale sliver of moonlight and smiled. As the world spun away from him, Charles felt the grasp on him change.

Nicholas' fangs tore the hapless man's throat with a savagery that made Janette grin. As the former knight drank, Janette's head tilted back and laughter bubbled from her blood stained lips. The body of Charles Peabody fell to the soft, mossy ground long minutes later, a barely audible sigh of air escaping him as he died.

* * *

A short distance away, LaCroix fed a different need -- one he had not felt for centuries. He remained hidden in the shadow of gently swaying trees, and his smile grew as he watched Gabrielle Colby's sylph-like body glide through the moonlight tinted waters of her private bath. Auburn hair streamed out behind her and she closed her eyes as the warm water caressed her. LaCroix heard the lingering roughness of tears that made her breaths uneven and erratic. Pain emanated from the beautiful woman, pain and deeply repressed desires.

The vampire felt his children feed, was aware of the twitch of hunger that rose from deep within him, but he was reluctant to leave this place. She stood and LaCroix watched her walk from the small lake. Droplets of crystalline water trickled off her pale curves and he was surprised to note the purely sexual craving that woke inside him. Firm breasts strained against the lightweight fabric of her shift as she tugged it on, and LaCroix resisted a laugh when he acknowledged his desire to suckle and caress those soft, tempting swells. How long had it been since he'd lusted for a mortal? His beautiful witch had enchanted him -- the thought was met by a small self-mocking smile; he already thought of her as **his** prize.

Her head came up sharply and he was momentarily disconcerted by the piercing gaze that was cast in his direction. Fear drifted to him and he turned away, mentally searching as she quickly gathered her things and dressed. Her panic became more tangible with each moment. Then she was gone from the haven he'd discovered was her refuge.

Annoyed, LaCroix extinguished the throb of desire she'd created in him and reached further outward with his thoughts. He sensed the stalking wolf that had alarmed her, and quickly dispatched the unfortunate animal with a mental command that made it yelp in pain before bolting away. He went to rejoin Janette and Nicholas.

* * *

Gabrielle shivered with the after-chill of her bath, and the inescapable sense of unnatural silence that permeated the forest. Something she couldn't name had frightened her away from her sanctuary, and it had taken her some time to curb the sense of panic. Because of her distraction, she'd taken a wrong turn on the path and now ended up walking an extra half mile back to the inn. The added distance was not entirely unwelcome, she mused. It was simply

more time to be spent in freedom. More time to miss the three people who had so unexpectedly reminded her of a different life, and all that she had been forced to give up. Three people? a voice inside her head repeated in self-mockery. She would miss **him**. The tall, silver-haired stranger with the piercing eyes and the voice that touched her like rich, flowing silk. She would long for LaCroix for the rest of her life.

* * *

They had taken only a few steps from the corpse when LaCroix's head snapped up in sudden alertness. He glanced back and Nicholas nodded, then melted into the shadows. Janette had already silently disappeared.

* * *

Gabrielle's mental wanderings came to an abrupt halt moments later when she encountered an obstacle in the trail that she hadn't noticed. She stumbled and fell. The feel of a body was almost a relief, probably one of the drunkards from the inn looking for a shorter way back to his home. Still, she was relieved, until she looked closely and saw the lifeless eyes of one of her husband's cohorts. Peabody, her mind noted in shock. She reached out a badly shaking hand and the scream of terror began to rise within her. She knew before she actually touched him, then she saw the gaping hole that had once been his throat. A tiny trickle of crimson dribbled into the cushioned ground beneath her.

Before Gabrielle could consciously stifle her horror, she started to scream. Unreasoning fear forced motion, and she crawled backward until she met the unyielding resistance of one of the huge trees that filled the forest. She groped blindly and hauled herself to her feet. Her eyes remained rivetted to the dead stare of the corpse in front of her.

* * *

LaCroix knew what he would find before the first shriek of terror rended the night air. He'd felt her approach seconds before the actual sound had reached them. Suppressing his annoyance, he strode back to the spot they had just left.

"Gabrielle."

When she didn't respond to him, he repeated her name with a new inflection of commanding power to his tone.

The quiet, controlled voice cut through the wall of panic that had surrounded her, and she was able to look away from the scarlet gore that had once been Peabody's throat. LaCroix stood a few feet away, pale moonlight surrounded him in a silvery radiance and gave him the appearance of a benevolent angel. She ran to him before she knew what else to do. Her arms went around him and she buried her face against his chest, desperate tears finally spilled forth.

LaCroix hesitated for a moment, pleasantly startled by the feel of Gabrielle in his arms. She was clinging to him, quiet sobs shuddering through her. He pulled her closer and began to whisper soft words of comfort as he led her away from the grisly scene she had found. He spotted Nicholas peering at him through the trees and the younger vampire's anger brought a small glimmer of amusement to his smile.

"You are safe, my pet," he murmured to the frightened woman. He stopped walking once they were well away from the body, and he turned her face up to meet his gaze. "You saw nothing, Gabrielle," he told her, weaving the hypnotic spell that would erase her memory of the horror she had witnessed. He felt her mind resisting his influence, and was oddly pleased by the realisation. It reinforced his belief that she was much stronger than she knew. Still, it was not long before she succumbed to the pressure of his suggestion, and the fear that had lit her eyes began to fade. "There is nothing here to frighten you, pet," he assured her in the same gentle, soothing tones he'd used to erase her remembrance of the death.

After several tense minutes, Gabrielle's fear ebbed away, left only confusion in its wake. Confusion, and an awareness that made her body tremble with a new kind of fright. She knew she should not allow herself to remain in LaCroix's embrace. The desire to be this close to him, closer, overrode her good sense.

"I am not frightened, my lord," she whispered in a tiny voice. "I have never felt safer in my life," she admitted with a sudden candour that made LaCroix smile.

The irony was a pleasure in itself, he thought. She was in more danger than her young life had ever known, yet all she felt was trust. And desire. Yes, the light in her eyes spoke clearly of her desire to share his bed.

LaCroix bent to brush her lips with his, and the sharp intake of her breath was followed immediately by the tentative pressure of her mouth meeting his caress. Her inexperience was frustrating but intriguing, and the vampire carefully tasted her mouth, keeping the stroke of his tongue delicate. Gabrielle stirred in his arms, and she moved closer to him to press her small frame to the long length of his body. She opened her mouth to him, invited his probe, and he felt the warmth of her tongue entwined with his as she answered his reawakened hunger.

LaCroix eventually drew away from the sweetness of her shy, caressing responses to him and held her face between his hands. "You are making it very hard for me to let go of you, my pet," he whispered, the words strangely sincere despite his flippancy.

"Take me with you, LaCroix!" she cried, no longer caring if she had to beg for his attention. She had never felt so alive before, and her body shook uncontrollably in his arms. All she could think of was the mindless, intoxicating happiness he had just taught her with his kiss. No one had ever touched her this way, nor had any kiss made her feel as she now did. "Please, my lord?"

The words were breathless, pleading.

"Gabrielle," he smiled warmly. "I am not leaving."

"But you will," she said sadly as tears filled her eyes once again. Stung by his apparent rejection, she pulled away from him and turned her back to hide the shame she felt at her

actions. She was a married woman, behaving like a wanton tramp. Why would someone like this nobleman want her? He could have any lover he chose, he would certainly want better than the battered wife of an innkeeper.

"LaCroix?"

Nicholas' voice reached them a moment before the young knight stepped into view. Gabrielle turned glistening eyes to him then ran, unable to face his kindness and decency.

"Why won't you leave her alone?" he asked, his voice low with anger.

"She wants me to take her with me when we leave," LaCroix laughed. "She feels safe with me, Nicholas," he informed the younger vampire.

"Why wouldn't she?" Nicholas retorted instantly. "You are making a habit of saving her from her fears. She doesn't know you are worse than anything she could imagine in this place."

"Perhaps you should tell her," LaCroix suggested coldly. The young knight's words angered him more than he would have preferred. He laughed then, the sound dark and contemptuous. "But, that would mean admitting you are just like me, wouldn't it, my Nicholas? And she would no longer look at you with such adoring respect. If you find this little wench so enchanting, dear boy, take her and be done with it!"

"It's not me she wants, LaCroix," he pointed out.

"And that matters?" the ancient vampire enquired, his voice again tainted with mocking amusement.

"Doesn't it?" Nicholas challenged, unexpected knowledge in his eyes as he faced his master. LaCroix held the steady stare for a full minute, then he nodded. The humour had vanished from his mood, to be replaced by the dangerous introspection Nicholas knew so well.

"Very good, Nicholas," LaCroix whispered. "You are learning to see more clearly."

The confirmation of LaCroix's desire for the woman did little to comfort the younger vampire. If anything, it made him feel that his reluctance to warn her was almost cowardly. Still, he could see no way to make her life better, short of taking her away before LaCroix could suspect him. It would only be a temporary solution, at best. He'd tried to leave LaCroix before, hadn't he? He'd never been successful. Gabrielle herself would not want to leave the master vampire. She was a child, he thought. A trusting child.

"She's an innocent -- " Nicholas stopped the sentence before he could complete the thought, and understanding lit sudden wrath in his eyes. "I should have guessed," he noted bitterly. "That's what fascinates you."

LaCroix's eyebrow rose as he considered the truth, then he laughed again and strolled back toward the inn.

"He will take her with us, Nickola," Janette remarked, as she appeared at his side seemingly out of thin air. "Perhaps she will be better off?"

"Are we?" he asked quietly. Blue eyes met blue in a moment of silent communion.

* * *

Gabrielle didn't stop her flight until she reached the back door of the large, sprawling inn that was her home. She slipped into the quiet kitchen and ignored the inquisitive stares of the few women who still worked. She was about to seek the quiet of her bedroom when Thom came in from the tavern room and spotted her.

"Where 've you been?" he growled, furious at the sight of her. He grabbed her arm and flung her through the open doorway he'd just passed through. He caught her again before she was fully into the room, and backed her against the wall. His face bent to hers and he saw the wince of distaste she couldn't completely suppress. "He left you behind, didn't he?" he laughed unpleasantly. "And after you was so eager to please him. Well," he continued, looking down at her with leering contempt, "at least he paid well. Not that he got his money's worth, to be sure."

"You're a monster, Thomas," she spit back in disgust. "You're not fit to speak to people like them. Only other creatures like yourself."

His hand closed over her throat and he held her pinned to the wall as his grip tightened relentlessly. Gabrielle's hands clutched his wrist in a futile effort to dislodge the strangling hold. Sound and vision grew dim, and she felt consciousness spinning away into a vortex of peaceful nothingness.

* * *

Tears flooded her eyes and told her she hadn't died after all. Gabrielle turned on the soft bed she'd somehow been placed in as sobs began to wrack her body. She refused to open her eyes and face the hopelessness of her life. She had wanted to die, and God had denied her another time. She buried her face in the pillow and curled into a tight ball as she rocked herself in a slow, agonised rhythm of despair. It wasn't until a gentle hand touched her shoulder that her eyes flew open and she saw where she had been taken.

Janette's expression was much more compassionate than she could have known as she brushed aside a wisp of tangled auburn hair and smiled down at the frightened woman.

"You are quite safe, madame," she assured her charge. "Nicholas found you," she explained when Gabrielle's confusion became evident.

"Why?" Gabrielle finally asked, and wiped at the tears that refused to stop spilling from her eyes. She barely managed to prevent the trapped sobs from bursting forth another time, but she was determined to at least try to regain some semblance of dignity.

"Because he is Nicholas," Janette answered with a low laugh. "He is the shining knight, you see. He feels he must honour that caste," she continued, confusing the shaking woman more than explaining anything. "It does not matter," Janette assured her. "You **are** quite safe. LaCroix is not happy with your husband, ma chérie."

Gabrielle stared at the other woman, sensed the curiosity Janette felt about her.

"I thought you would be gone by now," Gabrielle whispered, her voice rough and filled with pain. "I was sure of it."

"It is Nickola's opinion that we should never have stopped at your Inn, and I feel he may be quite right."

"Why did you?" Gabrielle asked. She winced at the stab of fiery pain that speared her throat each time she spoke, but she was unable to suppress her curiosity. She refused to acknowledge the anguish Janette's words woke within her -- to never have met LaCroix did not bear thinking about.

"We are on our way to Boston," the other woman explained. "There was a problem aboard our ship and we were forced to land just north of your charming little town." It wasn't quite the truth, but it was close enough. And, they were on their way to Boston.

Gabrielle grew quiet and brooding. She absorbed the dark-haired beauty's words, and tried to prepare her heart for the loss she felt nearing. They would be gone, very soon.

"You are thinking of how it will feel to say 'adieu' to him, aren't you?" Janette asked, her voice a soft caress of sympathy. She had never seen any mortal so enchanted with her master, and Gabrielle's unflinching trust in LaCroix was mildly disconcerting to one who knew him as intimately as Janette did.

"He told me he was not leaving," Gabrielle murmured, a tinge of irony giving the admission a melancholy sound.

Janette shrugged. "There are times when LaCroix is ruled more by whimsy than logic. He is quite taken with you, though he will not admit that fact."

Gabrielle was both shocked and thrilled by Janette's words, and she tried to find an appropriate answer for her. The other woman must have seen her struggle for she laughed quietly.

"It does not need to make sense, Gabrielle," she assured her. "LaCroix is often as erratic as Nickola. He is simply much more dangerous when he is angered. Your unfortunate husband has angered him a great deal, I'm afraid."

"I have to speak to him," Gabrielle said, struggling to rise from the bed. Janette offered her hand, and the room weaved for a moment when Gabrielle finally stood. She closed her eyes and steadied the nausea that threatened her, then she headed for the door.

* * *

The kitchen staff looked at her in varying degrees of surprise and relief when she stumbled into the large room. The cook, a small, round woman named Hope, grabbed the shaky landlady and led her to a chair.

"There, there, Gabrielle," she cooed gently. "Thom said you was feelin' poorly. Let me get you something."

"No," Gabrielle shook her head. "I must speak to Monsieur LaCroix. Is he still here, Hope?"

"He is, and that handsome young friend of his, too."

Gabrielle smiled absently. She suspected Nicholas had caught the eye of virtually every

member of the kitchen staff, and Hope was having a hard time keeping them at their work. Even as the cook tended to her, several of the maids were peering into the common room and giggling amongst themselves.

Gabrielle tried to think, to rid her mind of the fog that was determined to keep her slow and confused. She ran her hands through the heavy tangle of her hair, and only then realised what a sight she must look. She turned troubled eyes to Hope, and felt her heart break at the kindness in the older woman's eyes.

"Thomas tried to kill me last night, Hope," she whispered in horror. She saw that emotion reflected in the cook's unhappy expression, and was grateful for the comfort of Hope's work worn hands clasping hers. For several minutes they remained silent and huddled together, then the cook took a deep breath.

"This stranger, Gabrielle," Hope began reluctantly. "His presence is disturbing. He is not like his companions, that one."

"He saved my life!" Gabrielle defended LaCroix instinctively, and the sharpness of her words lit a deep sadness in the cook's eyes. Gabrielle withdrew her hands, and the void of emptiness grew inside her. She stared at the rough tabletop and struggled to find a way through the conflict that warred within her.

"I must see him," she whispered fiercely. She no longer cared that her words would reveal her unfaithful heart to the other woman. All that mattered now was her desperate need to see LaCroix.

"Then you should wait until the tavern is closed, Mistress," Hope remarked in a cool tone. Her disapproval was clear. "If you chose to carry on with this stranger in front of your husband, you are asking for more trouble. He will kill you both for your cuckoldry."

Gabrielle was stunned, and infuriated. She rose and Hope shrank back at the rage that lit Gabrielle's grey eyes. She'd rarely seen the lovely landlady angry, and had never been the object of her wrath. In the moment Gabrielle held her frightened gaze, Hope was reminded that this woman was not a commoner, as she herself was, but had once been in the same class as the guest she defended so vehemently. She was further intimidated when Gabrielle leaned down and spoke very softly.

"You will not judge me, Hope. Nor will anyone else. And if my pig of a husband dares to strike my guest, it is he, not I, who will suffer."

Hope knew Thomas Colby's bad temper, and his treatment of his wife. She could hardly fault the lovely young woman for her hatred. But, they were still bound by God's laws, and Hope had seen the way Gabrielle looked at the one called LaCroix. She had heard the maids whispering about the landlord's wife and the stranger, as well. Most of them were convinced Gabrielle was spending her nights with the pale nobleman, and blamed her flagrant disregard for his position for Colby's increasingly black mood. Hope had defended the young landlady. Now she, too, shared the opinion that Gabrielle was the stranger's trollop.

"Be careful, Gabrielle," she advised. "Of what you say, and more importantly, of what you do. You know what will happen if Thomas accuses you of -- "

"Enough!" Gabrielle snapped. "I have done nothing!"

Before Hope could find an appropriate reply, the landlady rose and slipped down the corridor that led to the rooms she shared with her husband.

* * *

The evening went on forever, and Gabrielle paced the chamber in restless anticipation. She had bathed and changed into the last decent dress she owned. The mere thought of seeing LaCroix sent a thrill of excitement through her, and she resisted again the urge to seek him out in the tavern. Only the fear of witnessing a brawl incited by Thomas kept her in the room. It would not be much longer before Colby would toss the last of his patrons out into the night.

She knew LaCroix would remain alone in the common room, as was his custom since arriving at the Inn. Gabrielle had found him there the third night of his stay, and it had been that night she'd fallen in love with the stranger. Sometimes, Nicholas was with him, and other times Janette too would be present. They enjoyed each other's company Gabrielle quickly discovered. And, to her considerable delight, they welcomed her at their table as well.

Gabrielle was enchanted by each of them in different ways. Janette she was in awe of, for the lady was beautiful, educated, and extremely clever. Nicholas was everything that could be admired in a man; kind, handsome, courageous, and honourable as few men she'd ever known. But, LaCroix was extraordinary. He was a thoroughly frightening combination of darkness and alluring hope. His voice affected her like a caress of silk. His look woke desires she barely recognised, and certainly of which she had little understanding. When he spoke of far away places and a life that she had once dreamed of, Gabrielle felt as if he read her soul and was offering it back to her.

She remembered their kiss, and the trembling surge of heat that had consumed her when she was entangled in his arms. Even now she shook with the recalled response of her body clinging to him, and begging for his attention as she had never wanted anyone else's.

Her wandering thoughts almost made her miss the telltale scuff of feet in the hall outside the rooms that were her home. She rose and hid beside the door as she waited. She had been too slow, and would have to escape after Thomas had fallen into bed. The doorknob was turning when Gabrielle heard the sound of Hope's voice calling Thomas back to the kitchen. When the echo of his curses and stomping feet faded, she slipped out of the room and headed for the darkest corner of the tavern.

* * *

"Monsieur LaCroix?"

LaCroix's smile was amused, and filled with satisfaction. He turned and extended his hand to the woman who hovered in the shadows at his left side. Gabrielle's small fingers curled around his and he pulled her into the dim firelight. His attention was immediately captivated

by the vision she presented to him. Expecting to see her as he had become accustomed to, he was pleasantly surprised by the beauty before him now. Her hair, gleaming auburn against the dancing flickers of light from the hearth, was loose and streamed over her bared shoulders. The gown she wore was of palest blue silk, and he could see the enticing swell of her breasts rising and falling as she fought for a composure that refused to come. The dress clung to her, and hugged her tiny waist, then spilled out into a full, shimmering skirt. In that instant, the decision he had unconsciously been toying with was unexpectedly made. He wanted nothing more than to claim this prize as his own, to immerse himself in the sweetness of her spirit as he drank the richness of her blood.

"You look lovely tonight, my pet," he murmured softly and rose from his chair to tower over her. He raised both her hands to his lips and kissed each palm. He sat her at the table and bent to place a light kiss on her shoulder before he returned to his own seat. The heat of her flushed skin lingered on his lips, and he repressed the taunting awareness as he watched her. He was genuinely curious that she dared to show herself to him this way. Especially with her husband close by.

"What do you wish of me, Gabrielle?" he enquired, a hint of lingering smile curving his mouth.

She felt the scarlet rush of colour that flooded her face, but managed to maintain his gaze. "Nothing," she answered quietly. "I only wished to be... close to you."

"Is that why your husband attempted to kill you last night?" he asked softly. "Because you are so attentive to guests he clearly has no liking for."

"You saved my life, monsieur," she said, grey eyes filled with curiosity, as well as gratitude. "Why would you risk such a thing for me?"

"It was not the risk you seem to imagine it," he laughed. "But, I now think I may have done it regardless of that."

"You have not told me why?"

"Because you interest me, pet," he answered, and again his low, vaguely mocking laughter whispered between them. "I find I am drawn by curiosity about you, and why you would stay in this place."

"I have no where else to go," she told him. Another rush of colour heated her face, and she stared down at her hands on the table.

"Is that why you wish to remain with me?"

Gabrielle closed her eyes as tears threatened to fall, then she shook her head and met the cool blue of his eyes. "I wish to apologise for my behaviour last night, my lord. I have no right to ask anything of you. I hope you will forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, Gabrielle," he assured her. He stood and took her hand again, pulled her to her feet and led her to a seat before the dying fire. The huge stone hearth was warm, and she sat on the edge of it as he settled on the floor at her feet.

"Your husband is a fool," he said.

Gabrielle's laughter was brittle and filled with loathing. "He is much more than that, I

assure you," she breathed in an undertone.

LaCroix reached out a hand and touched the slender ankle that peeked from beneath her skirts. The breath of contact still affected her, and she made no move to withdraw from his touch. Long, sensitive fingers drifted upward, over the smooth curve of her calf, until he found the satiny skin behind her knee. The tips of his fingers caressed the silky softness and he heard the tiny gasp of pleasure she tried to suppress.

He backed away and shifted his position. His intense gaze snared hers and she slowly slid off the hearth and knelt before him. His hands rose to stroke her hair, and her lips parted as she leaned forward in unwitting invitation. He denied the wordless request and let his fingers trace the curve of her jaw, then move across the heated warmth of her bared shoulders. He ignored the dark bruises that stood out in stark contrast against the pale skin of her neck, and was faintly surprised at the rise of anger he felt when he considered how close Colby **had** come to killing her.

Gabrielle's breaths were ragged and she touched his chest to steady herself as greater shudders of reaction shook her body. The delicate, exploring touch was waking a longing she had never experienced before. She was both appalled and intrigued by the languid warmth that was building within her, and settling between her thighs. A tiny moan escaped her when LaCroix's lips finally touched her throat, and his expert fingers glided over her body with sudden, possessive hunger. Her head fell back and she arched into the demand of his hands pulling her hips into firmer contact with his.

LaCroix's head snapped up abruptly when he felt the presence in the doorway a short distance from them. His eyes pierced the darkness, easily recognised the woman who lurked there.

"What is it?" Gabrielle whispered, eerily attuned to the shift of his attention. She felt a chill run the length of her spine and she pulled slightly away from him, her heart hammered furiously within her.

"Nothing, pet," he assured her.

Gabrielle stared up into his eyes, felt herself drowning in the compelling, strangely glittering depths. She loved him. In that single moment, she was no longer uncertain, or afraid.

"Perhaps you should return to your chambers?" LaCroix suggested, a tiny note of distraction in his voice.

"What?"

The shock in her eyes when he turned back to her was mildly amusing and LaCroix laughed softly.

"If you do not leave now, Gabrielle," he murmured gently, "Then I will be forced to take you here, whether we are being observed or not."

She blushed scarlet at his words, but to her absolute horror the response was accompanied by an equally intense thrill of excitement. If he **had** chosen to take her at that moment, she wouldn't have cared who witnessed her adultery.

LaCroix felt the confused emotions his words had evoked, and he was tempted.

Gabrielle was still tightly pressed to his body and he lowered his head briefly to her neck, his tongue caressed the pounding pulse and a breathy whimper of desire slipped from her lips. He smiled and allowed himself the luxury of absorbing her tremors as her arms wrapped around his neck and her head fell back to grant him access to the throat he now desperately wanted.

"I love you, LaCroix," she whispered softly. "Anything. I will do anything for you, mon bien-aimé."

LaCroix's hunger was momentarily overshadowed by tremendous satisfaction as he accepted her declaration. He drew back enough to stare into wide grey eyes and smiled at the unabashed adoration that shone back at him.

"Go upstairs, Gabrielle," he requested. "Wait for me."

"Where are you going?" She tried not to sound panicked, but part of her feared that he was going to leave her.

"I will be with you very soon," he assured her. "Now, go, my pet." He added the inflection of demand to the soft words, saw her confusion surface then fade into obedience. She rose with him, the action graceful and fluid, then he watched her climb the stairs. She had reached the top and was headed for the west wing bedroom when LaCroix crossed the room in a blinding blur of motion.

A low shriek of terror was cut off before it truly began. The serving girl Hope had sent to do her spying would never report back to her mistress. LaCroix would deal with the woman and Thomas Colby after he had taken his prize. He wiped Colleen's blood from the corner of his mouth and reached upward with his thoughts. He could feel Gabrielle's anticipation, heard every tiny shift of her mind as she fought the fright her husband's brutality had instilled in her. She was afraid of what LaCroix would want from her, but just as determined to allow him whatever liberty he would take. He smiled again. She would be a delightful student to the passions he intended to teach her.

* * *

Gabrielle paced the room and tried to quell the tears that threatened her composure. She couldn't stop entirely the trembling that assailed her each time she allowed herself to think about what LaCroix would expect from her. She had felt so violated and degraded by her husband's lust, how could it be different with another? Would LaCroix be any kinder to her than Thomas? She ran her hands through her hair and crossed to the window.

The coolness of the night air soothed, until she heard the heavy door swing inward and she spun around to face him. Her breath caught in her throat. LaCroix stood in the doorway, his pale presence haloed by the dim, flickering light of the candle he carried. He closed the door, and proceeded to light several of the tapers that were present in the room. Once the shadows dispersed, he went to sit on the edge of the bed. He held out his hand and Gabrielle walked toward him, took both his hands and knelt in front of him.

"You are afraid of me."

It was more statement than question and she would have denied it but he shook his head.

"Don't lie to me, Gabrielle. You have good reason for your fear, pet. I am not like your husband." LaCroix brushed aside a long strand of silken coppery hair and she pressed her head into the light contact.

"I don't want to be afraid," she confessed shakily. "I want to please you. But... " She looked to the floor.

LaCroix's smile grew. He tilted her head upward, long fingers brushed a gentle caress along her jaw.

"You do please me, my pet."

"I don't know... " Again she stopped speaking, then suddenly brave she rose on her knees and slipped her arms around him. She held him tightly, pressed her warmth to his chest. "Show me how to please you, LaCroix?" she asked quietly, her voice low but steady now.

LaCroix pulled her up from the floor until she sat astride his thighs, then he drew her mouth to his. She moaned softly as his tongue explored and caressed with urgent passion. Gabrielle's response was no less intense as she began to answer the thrusts and probes with awakened desire. He held her to him and settled back on the bed with her soft body draped over his.

Through the heavy folds of her gown, Gabrielle could felt the solid hardness of LaCroix's tall form. He wasn't at all like her husband. Every touch of LaCroix's hands was heavenly, and she felt heat flood her entire being when he shifted their position again. She laughed softly when he smiled down at her and his hips moved against her. The barrier of clothing between them seemed to enhance the sensation of heated longing, and she ran her fingers over his stunning features.

"You're not like anyone I've ever known," she told him.

"You are mine now, Gabrielle," he said quietly, his voice strangely intent. The quiet contained power in the resonant tone brought a smile to her features and she let one finger trace the full curve of his bottom lip.

"I have been yours from the moment you walked into this Inn, my lord," she whispered.

"Perhaps you have," he agreed. He ran pale, slender fingers along the scooped neckline of her gown, barely touching the flushed skin. "Come," he decided, and slowly eased away from her. He held her hand as he stood. She rose, uncertainty in her eyes.

LaCroix unfastened the stays on her gown, then slid the mass of heavy silk from her shaking body. He tossed the dress aside, saw it crumple in a glossy heap on Nicholas' bed, then he reached for her again. The white cotton shift she wore glowed in the warm candlelight, and he could see the erect points of her nipples straining against the thin fabric. He grazed one of the aroused tips with the ball of his thumb, heard the sharp intake of her breath as she experienced the pleasure of his touch. She moved nearer to him as his hands covered the soft warm globes of her breasts and caressed with firmer pressure. She leaned into the provocative touch and tried to step closer again.

LaCroix shook his head and withdrew his hands. She gasped softly and shivered when

he continued to undress her until she stood before him naked and trembling. Only then did he permit her to step fully into his embrace. His hands glided over the smooth curve of her back, cupped her buttocks and pulled her hips into solid contact with his. She squirmed against him, and drew his mouth down to hers. Her hunger momentarily surprised him, then he lost himself in the surge of passion her restless hips evoked.

LaCroix lifted her and placed her back on his bed. He sat next to her and she stared up at him, grey eyes dazed and filled with unmistakable yearning. He lowered his head to her heaving breasts, took one hard nipple between his teeth and bit softly. She arched into the caress and his tongue played sensuously over the responsive tip as his hand slid between her thighs and parted them. She resisted his touch for the first time and he drew back to watch her expressive features and gauge her responses to him.

"Look at me, pet," he ordered quietly, his rich voice like a cool, soothing caress against her mind. Huge grey eyes opened again and gazed adoringly at him.

LaCroix held her transfixed gaze as he once again dipped a finger into her slick warmth. She tensed, but didn't attempt to pull away from him this time as he probed deeper. Her eyes widened when he withdrew then brought the finger to his lips and licked the moisture he'd taken from her body. She flushed crimson and he laughed low in his throat. He rose and was mildly surprised when she crawled to her knees to watch every movement he made as he stripped off his own clothes and stood before her.

"You are beautiful," she breathed in overt appreciation. Her eager gaze wandered over his tall, regal form. Her eyes kissed every inch of pale, flawless skin and she held her hands out to him, painfully aware of the quivering she couldn't subdue. She had never seen any man other than her husband this way, and Thomas was nothing like LaCroix. A shiver worked up her spine as her look strayed over him again then met his sapphire eyes.

LaCroix took her hands in his and placed them against his chest as he tugged her to her feet. She leaned up to meet his kiss and he pushed her hands lower, until shaking fingers closed over him. His hand covered hers, guided her, and their kiss deepened as she quickly began to explore without his help. LaCroix enjoyed the shudder of pleasure that rose within him when her lips trailed down the side of his neck and her hands roamed more freely.

He laughed when her teeth tugged at the rigid tips of his nipples, and he resisted the temptation to guide her questing mouth lower. He caught her hands from behind him and brought the open palms to his mouth. He kissed each hand and eased her back to the bed.

Gabrielle felt the heat of unversed lust consume her when LaCroix's weight settled over her. Her legs parted to accommodate him and she felt a tiny stab of unwanted terror as she awaited his possession. She had never felt this burning within her, the inexplicable need that he'd awakened. She didn't understand what was happening to her, but she did know he could have any part of her that would offer him the pleasure he'd taught her this night.

LaCroix felt the shifts and twists of her thoughts, read them easily as he paused. He brushed back tendrils of auburn hair and kissed closed eyelids before his lips covered hers. His tongue slipped gently into her mouth as their bodies joined with equal care. She moaned softly

and he absorbed the spasm of rapture that rippled through her as he thrust deeper into her. Her legs tangled around his and her body arched beneath him, answering its own need as she instinctively sought the rhythm of his passion.

Gabrielle felt her body explode with ecstatic pleasure as he moved within her, and she strained harder against him. LaCroix's name came from her in hoarse gasps and she clung to him. She felt the change in him minutes later and stared up into eyes that had turned to golden liquid fire. She heard the growl of hunger in his throat as he continued to move with her.

"Yes," she breathed when he waited for her reaction. She had no fear of him, only love filled her heart. With a groan of agonised desire she wrapped her arms tighter around him and drew the revealed sharp fangs down to her neck in total surrender to him.

"Don't leave me," she whispered, tears streamed from her eyes and she cried out as her body writhed and the first pang of pain was replaced by greater euphoria than before. She felt the release of his passion and heard the soft sucking sounds of his feeding as she held him closer and drifted into blissful fulfillment. When LaCroix drew away, ripped a gash in his chest and drew her mouth to the dark flow of his blood, she drank eagerly.

During the next hours the master vampire bound her to him as he had few others, their blood mingled and her soul became his possession. He felt every fading beat of her heart as he held her nestled to his side. Death would not be long claiming her, and he would keep the promise she'd asked of him. Gabrielle would die in his arms.

* * *

Nicholas approached the small west wing room with a weary heart. They'd lingered too long at this Inn, he felt. LaCroix's fascination with Gabrielle Colby was becoming more openly blatant, and it was equally clear that the landlord's wife had fallen in love with the vampire. It would only be a matter of time before something happened that would put them on the run again. Maybe it was that, more than anything else, which bothered Nicholas. In Europe they had friends and homes to run to, places where a lifetime could be spent in peace and enjoyment. Here, in this wild new land, he felt a vulnerability that disturbed him.

It didn't help, he conceded to himself, that he, too, found Gabrielle a charming and enchanting companion. She understood things that no mortal should be aware of, and she felt things in much the same way Nicholas did. They had already spent many hours in conversation, exchanging ideas, dreams, hopes. All because each knew they were wishes that could never be fulfilled. Gabrielle was trapped in a marriage that would age her long before she should be old, if it did not destroy her completely before then. Nicholas was trapped in an eternal life from which there was no escape. In the midst of their despair was a pale, silver shadow -- Gabrielle's vision of hope, and Nicholas' curse. LaCroix might yet change destinies for them both.

Nicholas had tried repeatedly to discover the master vampire's intentions for the auburn haired beauty, to no avail. If LaCroix had plans for this woman, he was not prepared to reveal them to Nicholas, or Janette. The lovely vampire had tried her hand at getting information from

LaCroix, as well, and she had met with no more success than Nicholas. That she was furious with LaCroix virtually all the time now seemed to amuse the older vampire more than concern him. He accused her of jealousy, and Nicholas was forced to admit that he wasn't entirely wrong. Janette loved being the centre of attention, and he knew she would not easily adjust to another woman in their company.

He had almost reached the room when he felt the change in the air. His vampiric senses tingled with the multitude of resonances that lingered in the tiny hallway. He could feel the vibrations of spent passion, that unmistakable scent mingled with another that was equally potent. Blood. He strained his hearing, and caught the faint whisper of a weakening heartbeat. He recognised the rhythm and knew what would greet him before he opened the door and went inside.

The candles had sputtered out, the faint smell of burnt wax mingled with the other scents that hung in the air. His eyes pierced the darkness naturally as he found them. They were lying on the bed, bodies still entwined in a tangle of pale, shapely limbs. He didn't want to acknowledge the meaning of their intimacy. Yet, something drew him to a watchful pose next to the bed. He stared down at the lovers, his eyes drawn more to LaCroix than the woman in his arms. The vampire's features were relaxed and open, an expression Nicholas had not seen for many, many years. Against his will, his gaze roamed, silently caressed the familiar contours of his master's powerful body. Long legs were given the sheen of marble as moonlight illuminated the bed and bathed the vampire in cool, white radiance. LaCroix's arms cradled the beautiful woman to his side, one hand buried in the heavy waves of reddish hair that streamed over her back and spilled onto LaCroix's chest. His other hand covered hers where it rested over his heart.

How long had it been since he'd sensed this side to LaCroix? He had become complacently at ease with his disdain for the ancient vampire. He refused to let himself see LaCroix as so many others did. Gabrielle had spoken almost shyly about her interest in LaCroix, and Nicholas had become aware of exactly how deep that attraction went within her. He hadn't taken the time to notice the sensuality that rose in her eyes only when LaCroix appeared. Nor had he seen the blind trust and longing. LaCroix had been conscious of it, though, he knew. The older vampire was a master in all respects. And, Nicholas knew from his own past with LaCroix, the vampire's alluring sexuality was a natural and overwhelming part of his personality.

Nicholas felt his heart swell with regret, yet he could not hold the emotion when his look shifted to Gabrielle's face. Her expression was filled with peace, and a happiness that he could feel emanating from her even as she died in the vampire's arms. Secure and safe, her entire being was consumed by her trust in, and love for the elegant, fair haired stranger who held her. The thought came, unbidden, and unwelcome; 'Did I look like that the night he took me?'

LaCroix's quiet voice whispered from the shadowy darkness, rich and smooth as silk.

"You could never shed your guilt long enough to fully appreciate the possibilities of our shared passions, Nicholas."

Shocked and appalled that he had been so easily read, Nicholas all but staggered across the room to his own bed. He flung aside Gabrielle's discarded dress, dropped to the feather mattress and closed his eyes as LaCroix's soft, mocking laughter filtered across the short space that separated them.

Loneliness filled Nicholas. An ache so profound he felt drained by it. His senses seemed determined to prevent his escape into sleep, despite the approaching sunrise. He could hear Gabrielle's breathing in the next bed, gradually slowing as death stole over her. He felt LaCroix's gaze on him, taunting and curious at the same time. His thoughts had revealed things to them both tonight. Things better forgotten, some inner voice condemned. Still, when he heard Gabrielle's breathy voice a short while later, his heart seemed to contract with pain. LaCroix's name, her dying word. He felt the vampire's smile, sensed his pleasure, and heard the light kiss he placed on the dead woman's lips.

Nicholas closed his eyes and dragged in a deep breath that was designed solely to calm the tempest that rose within him. His emotions seemed to rise and fall like a relentless storm, tossing his carefully cultivated peace of mind into chaos. He was so lonely, it was unbearable. He did not want to admit why, most especially to himself.

He started violently several minutes later when he felt the cool, gentle touch of long tapering fingers tracing the curve of his cheek. He wanted to pull away from the touch, but a deeper desire held him still. He opened his eyes and stared into the dazzling blue gaze that hovered mere inches above his face. He saw the curving outline of LaCroix's smile, the expression oddly tender in the shadows that blanketed them.

In spite of the instinctive objection forming in the back of his mind, Nicholas opened his arms to the man seated on the edge of his bed. LaCroix's tall, pale body stretched out next to his young companion's and he bent his head to Nicholas' neck, fangs seeking as the former knight's arms wrapped around him. For the first time in almost a century, Nicholas accepted his vampire father's embrace and the comfort only LaCroix's presence could offer.

* * *

"Where is she?" Thomas roared as he strode into the kitchen area of the Inn.

Hope flinched away from his anger, not quickly enough to avoid the resounding slap he issued when she wasn't able to give him an answer. She tasted blood, and daubbed at the corner of her mouth as she stared into his wild eyes.

"Who, sir?"

"Colleen," he sneered. "The little bitch never returned."

Hope had feared sending the girl to watch Gabrielle and the stranger but Thomas would not be dissuaded. The cook knew in her heart that Colleen had been spotted and was probably dead. Anger and hatred rose rapidly within her breast.

"Your wife's lover may know," Hope spat with visible contempt.

Thomas glared at her. Gabrielle had vanished from the Inn two nights ago, after Colby

had attacked her in the hallway. He'd thought the traitorous slut dead when he left her. He'd also thought the strangers gone from his house. The cook's words infuriated him, but he didn't bother punishing her for the insult she'd just paid him. Colby strode from the kitchen and headed up the stairs.

As she watched him go, Hope felt a conflict of emotions. She had liked Gabrielle, but more deeply ingrained than her fondness for the other woman was the disgust she felt when she considered the careless way the young woman had shamed her husband. There was also the undeniable fact that she disliked LaCroix intensely. In Hope's mind, men like him took what they desired without regard for propriety or decency, and it was his fault Gabrielle had degraded herself and forsaken her marriage vows.

* * *

Thomas was halfway up the stairs when he was called back by Elias Porter and Jacob Bentley. Bentley was the local judge, and Porter the wealthiest merchant in the small seaport town. The two men were visibly distraught as they waited for Colby to join them.

"What the hell is going on?" Colby snapped. He was irritable and foul-tempered at the best of times, today the condition was worse than usual.

"Will Hamilton's body was just found, Thom." Bentley managed to make the announcement without revealing the revulsion he experienced each time he thought about the condition of Hamilton's corpse.

"Body?" Colby repeated stupidly. He gave the revelation a moment's consideration then his features darkened with anger. "You don't think I had anything to do with it?" he demanded and slammed the two mugs of ale he'd just poured onto the bar. Miraculously the earthenware cups didn't shatter on impact.

"Of course we don't," Bentley assured him. "Ain't no way you could've had anything to do with what happened to Will."

Something in the hushed words nagged at Colby.

"Well, get on with it!" he snapped after the two men downed their ale and continued to eye each other nervously.

"The body was found about half a mile from here, in the wood." Porter had finally found his voice.

"When was the last time anyone seen him?" Thom asked warily.

"The night you threw him out," Bentley answered. He cleared his throat and looked around the empty common room, his suspicious gaze looking for possible eavesdroppers. "Did anything unusual happen that night, Thom?"

Colby scowled at him. "Not unless you consider my slut of a wife flaunting herself at him unusual."

"Is that why you tossed him out?"

"What the hell difference does it make?" Thom snarled. "The son-of-a-bitch was fine

enough when he left here."

"Who's staying here just now, Thom?"

The Innkeeper eyed Bentley with greater suspicion. He was about to dispatch his visitors when it occurred to him that this might be his opportunity to rid himself of the unwanted guests in the west wing.

"Come to think of it, the night I threw Will out we had some late arrivals. Three of 'em, two men and a woman."

"Ever seen 'em before?"

"Strangers. Foreigners, too. French. Gabrielle tended to them," Colby said with a sneer. The reminder of his wife's interest in LaCroix was all it took to enrage Thomas again.

"We've seen them," Porter remarked thoughtfully. "The lady's a real beauty," he added with an appreciative smile.

Before anything could be added, the door to the tavern was swung open with a loud bang. Reverend Jack Ward staggered into the room and made for the nearest table. He was white as death and the shaking that assailed him was noticeable from their vantage point across the room.

"What in God's name is happening in this town?" Colby yelled.

"God has nothing to do with it, to be sure." Ward crossed himself and his eyes closed in a fervent prayer. When he was slightly more composed, he rose and joined the three men who watched him with varying degrees of exasperation.

"We just dragged Charles Peabody from the lake, his throat's been torn out, just like Will's."

Colby laughed darkly. "So all this fuss is because of a rabid wolf."

"No wolf I ever saw tore a man's throat like that," Porter whispered with a shudder.

"What are we going to do?" the Reverend asked.

"Organise a hunting party," Colby stated, his sarcastic snort indicated that should have been obvious, even to a religious man. "We'll track the beast and destroy it."

"Do you think your guests would want to join the hunt?" Bentley questioned. Now that some semblance of a plan had been offered, he quickly took the idea and made it his own.

"Them!" Thomas snorted again, his mirth laced with hatred and contempt. "I just as soon we fed the beast their heads. Somehow I don't think those two would have the stomach for a blood hunt." His friends joined him in his dark laughter, but some inner voice mocked Colby and assured him he was very wrong about at least one member of the party which occupied the west wing rooms. LaCroix's icy blue eyes appeared before him, and the disdain in their pale depths seemed to reach out and touch Thomas like a chilling kiss of death.

* * *

The day had been exceedingly long. The Pirate's Cove hunting party had combed the heavily wooded parametres of the town and when it was nearing dark, they'd cornered 'the wolf' in his lair. This was the unfortunate beast LaCroix had sent scrambling the night he'd watched

Gabrielle bathing. The vampires had heard the return of the hunters, and shortly thereafter the sounds of revellry drifted upward to them. Nicholas was pacing and all but shouting at the calm, unconcerned figure staring out the window.

"We have to leave here, LaCroix!"

"We will, Nicholas," the master vampire eventually said as he spared a glance at his irate companion. "Very soon." His gaze moved to the bed, and the sleeping woman who occupied it.

"You should have left her alone," Janette remarked when she saw the direction of his interest.

"She is not your concern, Janette."

The words were firm, and brooked no argument. She glared at him but held her silence.

"They're going to discover their 'wolf' was not responsible for the deaths," Nicholas snapped. "We have to leave before that happens."

"Why?"

He stared in open amazement at the pale-haired vampire.

"They're certainly no threat to us, Nicholas," LaCroix soothed in a bored tone. He walked to the bed and sat on the edge, long fingers traced the delicate curve of Gabrielle's cheek. The bruises Colby had inflicted on her loveliness were gone without trace, her skin was flawless and her beauty ethereal. He sensed her slowly waking from death. She'd be hungry when she woke. He smiled at the thought. Her hungers would be complex and much like his own, he'd bound her deeply; she'd be as savage as he wanted her to be, in all ways.

"They'll be a threat when she wakes, chéri," Janette assured him.

"Leave us!" LaCroix ordered sharply.

Nicholas and Janette were visibly startled by the vehemence in the directive. For several moments they remained as they were, until LaCroix's head turned and glowing eyes bored into them.

"**Leave us!**" he repeated, the growl deadly and furious.

Nicholas took Janette's arm and they slipped from the room.

* * *

The Inn was empty when Gabrielle finally opened her eyes hours later. The first thing she saw was the face of her lover. LaCroix smiled down into her eyes and she rose when his hand at the back of her neck eased her toward him. Her arms slid around him and her mouth sought his. Her entire body shuddered when he pulled her snugly to his body and kissed her with a thoroughness that made his lovemaking of the previous night seem tame.

"I'm hungry," she whispered long minutes later.

"Then we must find something for you," LaCroix replied gently. He knew exactly who would serve his purpose too.

"What hour is it?"

"It's late, my pet," he murmured into her ear.

Gabrielle rested her head against his shoulder and sighed happily when LaCroix's fingers smoothed over the tangled mane of her hair.

"It wasn't merely a dream," she breathed. "I had thought to wake and find you gone."

"I will never leave you, Gabrielle," he promised with a satisfied smile. "Come."

She stood with his help and a pang of unbearable pain made her fall to her knees at his feet. Again, LaCroix was instantly attentive to her discomfort. He picked her up and held her as the shaking began to subside. The second attempt was successful and she quickly dressed in the white shift that served as her only undergarment. When she reached for the silk gown, LaCroix shook his head.

"I prefer you as you are," he smiled, his appreciative gaze swept over her curving form then came to rest on the slender column of her neck.

She accepted his appraisal with a calm she would not have believed possible a few days earlier. The hunger in his look woke all the passion that she had learned herself capable of the previous night.

She would never tire of LaCroix's lust.

He led her from the room and they descended the stairs to the common room. The Inn was silent, seemed deserted when she was used to hearing it filled with life and ribald laughter.

LaCroix listened to the stillness, heard the telltale beat of a heart, and knew Thomas would find them before long. He was deliberately muting the perceptions Gabrielle's newly awakened vampiric senses would feed her, he wanted her hunger fully aroused before he allowed her to claim the prize he had chosen for her initiation.

She preceded him into the room and LaCroix watched her closely as she wandered. Gabrielle came to a halt before the massive fireplace, and she held her hands out to him, the invitation clear. The fading embers cast a red-gold glow over her, the illusion of warmth and innocence further teasing LaCroix's desire. Grey eyes were brazen in their longing, not uncertain and timid as they had been last night. She wanted him, perhaps more than she needed sustenance.

For a fleeting moment, Gabrielle thought he would refuse her. Terror coursed through her veins and she almost ran to him. He smiled and stepped toward her. Blue eyes were alive with power and she smiled blissfully when LaCroix's arms encircled her waist and held her moulded to him as he bent to cover her mouth. The thrust of his tongue was matched by the seductive motion of his hips and she shivered against him as she answered both demands with the full force of her love.

She leaned into his touch when he eased her down to the floor and lowered his head to her breasts. She bit back a cry of pleasure as his teeth tugged at the aching tip of one rigid nipple. The thin cotton shift was still between them and she drew back enough to pull the material aside and expose naked flesh to his caresses. He laughed softly, a low growl of enjoyment and she guided his eager mouth to the firm nipple of her other breast. Minutes later he cupped the soft mounds in his palms, kneaded with increasing pressure as his tongue caressed

the silken skin at her throat.

Gabrielle choked on the intensity of her desire. She felt as though LaCroix absorbed her very soul in his kisses and caresses. She was being devoured by his possession, and she wanted only more intimate touches. She reached for one of his hands, inwardly appalled at the wantonness of her action as she slid his unobjecting fingers across her belly and downward between her thighs.

"Please," she begged, her voice a rough hiss of need.

"Deceitful, traitorous whore!"

The magick LaCroix had woven shattered as Thomas Colby's snarl of rage broke through the haze of passion. Gabrielle turned as LaCroix casually released her, and her face froze in horror when she saw the pistol in her husband's hand. She scrambled to her feet and stood in front of LaCroix.

"Thomas, no! You cannot do this," she pleaded.

"Gabrielle."

She heard LaCroix's cold, deadly voice near her ear -- she ignored him. All her mind would acknowledge was the danger to him. She tried to take a step toward Thomas but found she was pressed tightly against LaCroix, and his arm encircled her waist. Colby's eyes became wild with jealous fury when he took in the half-naked state of his wife, and he raised the weapon.

The few minutes which followed would never truly be clear to Gabrielle. In a burst of strength born of sheer terror, she escaped LaCroix's hold and lunged for her husband. She caught his hand and the pistol exploded with a blast of sound that was deafening. Thomas cursed and kicked her aside, his foot landing solidly in her stomach. The blow made her recoil in agony.

LaCroix's 'patience' snapped.

He beckoned the innkeeper forward with a contemptuous smile. Colby hesitated for a heartbeat's space of time, then he grabbed up one of the fireplace pokers and charged forward. His attack had all the grace of an enraged bull.

LaCroix was waiting to meet the rush when he was taken by surprise a second time. Colby's eyes bulged in horror and pain, then he fell at LaCroix's feet, the soot-blackened length of the second fireplace poker protruded from his back. Gabrielle still held the crude weapon and as Thomas fell forward, the poker slipped from the wound. The rough iron rod clattered to the floor seconds later when she became aware that she still held it. The vampire stared from the crumpled body to the dishevelled beauty who had just 'saved his life'. Gabrielle's hands rose to her mouth, and her face transformed with disbelieving horror.

LaCroix stepped over Colby's body, and wrapped Gabrielle in his arms. She clung to him as fear and perverse satisfaction vied for dominance in her heart. She felt her stomach twitch as the scent of fresh blood teased the hunger she'd been conscious of since waking. She looked up at LaCroix for guidance.

"He's not dead, pet," he assured her. "He's waiting for you."

As the ancient vampire insinuated his hold more firmly into her mind, she gradually stepped back and glared at her fallen husband. He had rolled onto his back and was now attempting to stand. She placed her small foot on his chest and pushed him back to the floor. Colby screamed in anguish. She felt LaCroix's amusement touch her mind and it made her bolder. Thomas glowered but remained oddly quiet now. LaCroix's will would not allow him to utter a sound.

"I hate you, Thomas Colby," she hissed softly, her gentle voice a cold imitation of its usual meekness. She stepped over him, feet on either side of his thighs, then dropped to her knees.

As his lover knelt astride her victim LaCroix laughed quietly. One eyebrow raised in speculative interest and he sat at a nearby table to watch her. The provocative mood and the deceptively sensual position of his new pet was exciting him with surprising intensity.

Colby made a grab for her, and Gabrielle intercepted his hands so swiftly he cried out when his captured limbs were slammed against the floor. She leaned forward, her shift fell open to allow her imprisoned husband a deliberate look at her nakedness beneath the thin garment.

"Do you still want me, Thomas?" she questioned, her voice mocked and taunted him at the same time. "Do you want to touch me? To **fuck** me like one of your wretched serving whores?"

Colby stared at her, shocked by the words as much as the manner in which they'd been spoken. He had never known her to speak like this, even when she was enraged by his actions. Her hips moved against him, tantalising and arousing despite his fear of the man who watched her tormenting him.

Gabrielle laughed suddenly and sat back. She still held his hands in the steely grip. Blood pooled near their laced fingers and she felt another of the searing pangs of hunger when she spotted the growing stain.

LaCroix saw the weakness threaten her and he indulged his own desire to participate in this first kill. He stood and the motion instantly brought her entranced gaze up to him. Her smile twisted with macabre anticipation when he began to undress. Colby's eyes bulged in their sockets when the master vampire stepped into view.

Her hands released Colby and reached up to LaCroix. The vampire bent and drew the lightweight shift over Gabrielle's head. She tossed her hair away from her face as he stepped behind her and knelt at her back. Now they both straddled Colby's body. She caught her husband's hands again when he tried to push her away, and the action had her leaning over the stricken man. LaCroix moved with her. The master vampire lowered his mouth to her neck, suckled soft skin as he reached around to fondle the fullness of her breasts. She moaned quietly and he heard the vampire wake within her. He raised his head to smile down into Colby's disgusted and terror-filled eyes.

"Your wife is mine, Colby," LaCroix murmured. "And I enjoy her as you never could."

LaCroix moved closer to her, his hands drifted lower and came to rest on the insides of her thighs. He held her, parted her legs further and slid into her. She thrust back against him,

drew him deeper with the movement. He covered her hands with his and reinforced the hold on Thomas as he shifted his position and began to move within her.

"Take back your life, my pet," LaCroix encouraged, his resonant voice soft with compelling command.

Gabrielle felt the furious hunger become an agony as the thrust of LaCroix's hips became harder and faster. She shook her head and Thomas screamed as her fangs emerged completely and she tore into his throat with lethal swiftness. The Thirst was unbearable and she drank greedily as her body writhed with the rhythm of LaCroix's possession.

When there was nothing left, she was hauled away and LaCroix's fangs sank into her neck as he held her tightly to his chest. The body they made love over was forgotten as twin growls of frenzied lust echoed in the unnatural quiet of the Inn.

* * *

Nicholas and Janette felt the spectre of death that hovered in the tavern. She reached out to touch her companion's arm, and was mildly disconcerted by the reactive tremor that shook her. Nicholas stared down into her eyes, his own like shards of ice. LaCroix's voice was unmistakable, as was the tone -- how often had they heard that mocking, torturing pitch?

Despite the solid hold Janette had on his arm, Nicholas jerked away from her and strode toward the common room. He knew she was only a step behind him when he came to a full stop in the shadowed doorway. His stomach churned with loathing at the scene he witnessed. Thomas Colby lay on the floor, over him were Gabrielle and LaCroix; he was taking her the way a dog would take a bitch in heat.

The master vampire's face was softened with the intensity of his pleasure as he made love to his newest child, while she drained her trapped husband of life. It was obscene. Nicholas winced unconsciously when LaCroix wrenched her away from Colby's throat and pierced her neck to feed his own hunger.

Gabrielle cried out in her elation and Nicholas slumped against the doorframe. Behind him, Janette fought her own battle for control. The voices of the enthralled lovers blended as their passion peaked, twin rumbles of pleasure and sensual gratification. When LaCroix freed his lover, Nicholas thought it over. He stepped from the darkness as Gabrielle stretched out before the dying fire and opened her arms to her master. LaCroix covered her body with his and licked the stain of blood from her mouth before his tongue delved into the welcoming warmth.

Her legs tangled around LaCroix's and Nicholas felt their renewed joining as acutely as he had experienced LaCroix's dominion the previous night. He hated the reminder that he had felt comforted and loved in the master vampire's arms. LaCroix's passions were a madness, and the lovely redhead clearly gloried in his possession of her. Nicholas understood her addiction, and knew no amount of time would dim her pleasure of the unions with her master -- LaCroix would see to that. He'd imprison her in her own devotion and love.

Janette saw the conflict written on his handsome features and she tugged at his arm.

"Nickola!" she whispered in a frantic hiss. "Leave them. You know he will be like this all night." She had not seen this side of the ancient vampire for **many** years, but she did know him better than anyone else -- his hunger for Gabrielle Colby was as consuming as the lady's desire for him. As long as Gabrielle interested him, LaCroix's appetite would be insatiable.

Nicholas wanted to say something, do something, but she was right and he had no argument to offer. He also knew LaCroix was fully aware of their presence, but chose to ignore them. Hatred rose within him, crested in his throat like a vile tasting brew of shame and humiliation. He tore his gaze from the entwined lovers and he and Janette left the tavern room as silently as they'd entered.

* * *

Gabrielle stretched contentedly and smiled when LaCroix's arms drew her back against his chest. She reached for the hand that lazily caressed her breast and brought the open palm to her lips. She turned willingly when he whispered her name.

"I love you," she breathed softly. "I have never felt this way before."

LaCroix's laughter was indulgent and satisfied.

She frowned. "You are still planning to leave?"

"Of course," he licked the stain of his blood from her forehead, then looked down into eyes that were now lit with fright. "You are coming with me, pet."

She closed her eyes and shivered when he laughed again.

"What about that?" she asked, and cast a disdainful glare at her dead husband. "And this place?"

"Do you wish to stay here?"

She heard the inflection of anger in his deep voice and immediately shook her head. "No. But they will hunt us if Thomas disappears and I run."

"Then we will stay long enough to insure that does not happen."

"Nicholas is angry now, LaCroix. He wanted to leave several days ago."

The concern for Nicholas irritated LaCroix. He caught her chin in a strong grip and forced her gaze to meet his. "Nicholas is **not** your affair, my pet. You would do well to remember that."

Gabrielle was stung by the harsh words, but held her tongue.

"I will take care of your husband," LaCroix told her. "Go to your rooms, the sun will be rising in less than an hour."

"Will you join me there?"

LaCroix's eyebrow rose and he smiled. "I fully intended to."

Gabrielle felt desire shudder through her another time. She rose and gathered up the flimsy shift she'd worn earlier. Without pulling the garment on, she headed for the bedroom she would now occupy with the only lover she'd ever want.

* * *

Hope felt her blood run cold when she stepped into the kitchen and saw the pale figure who sat at the rough table used by the servants. LaCroix smiled and beckoned her forward. She jerked toward him like a doll manipulated by an expert puppeteer. She crossed herself wildly and his laughter echoed in the predawn stillness of the Inn.

* * *

Nicholas heard the screech of terror and it made him cringe. Janette, curled into his arms, held him firmly at her side when he would have risen.

"It's already too late, Nickola," she whispered. "If you interfere there will be others before we leave here."

"How many lives will our secret demand this time?" the golden-haired knight rasped. Pain lodged in his throat and he swallowed the tightness that constricted his voice.

"It does not matter," she shuddered delicately. "Not to LaCroix. It never has, as you well know, mon amour."

"She's already as savage as he is."

"She is what he sensed, Nickola. Gabrielle Colby is what drew him to this Inn. I've rarely seen him like this, so... "

"Infatuated?" Nicholas offered when she was unable to find the word that she sought.

"Oui," she considered the word, then shook her head. "Non, he is more than infatuated, he is obsessed. It is much like he was when he first discovered you."

"She wanted him."

"We all want him, Nickola," Janette chided. "Even you, my brave knight."

He tried to deny her, the lie stuck in his throat. Scarlet tears stained the smooth curve of his cheek and he closed his eyes as the first rays of the rising sun began to bathe the world in warmth.

* * *

Gabrielle shivered into consciousness and laughed when LaCroix's hands glided over her and pulled her hips into contact with his.

"I want to wake each night like this," she murmured as she rolled onto her side and draped a leg over his hip to pull his thigh between hers. She pressed herself to the taut muscle of his leg and he increased the pressure of their touch.

"You have become a whore overnight, pet," he teased.

"As you wished," she returned and covered his lips with hers.

* * *

Nicholas and Janette looked up from their untouched drinks when they felt the arrival of LaCroix and Gabrielle. The two were not even looking at each other, but there was an unmistakable bond between them. Heads turned and a hush fell over the common room of the tavern. The pale-haired vampire continued through the nervous crowd and joined his companions. Gabrielle walked behind the bar.

"Where is Mr. Colby?" Diana Miller asked.

Gabrielle smiled at the younger woman. "Why? Was he supposed to meet you last night?"

Diana's dark eyes grew wary and she busied herself by pouring several mugs of ale. She knew the landlady didn't give a damn where her husband spent his nights, so why did she feel so guilty?

"I haven't seen him since last night," Gabrielle told the anxious serving girl. "Perhaps the wolf they killed had a mate?" she suggested wickedly.

"Aye, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Diana snapped as panic rose in her chest.

Gabrielle shrugged, genuinely unconcerned.

"You'll not live long enough to enjoy this place once they find out you're that bastard's whore!" Diana hissed in an undertone.

"If you wish to continue working here, Diana," Gabrielle said with a cold smile, "you will keep your mouth shut and out of my business." When the girl began to turn away, the vampire grabbed her arm and hauled her around so their eyes met. "Think long and wisely before you meddle in things of which you have no understanding," the landlady advised. She released the girl as quickly as she'd taken hold of her, and they both stared in surprise at the faint bruises already showing on pale skin. "Get about your business!" Gabrielle snapped furiously.

* * *

"How much longer do you intend to keep us here?" Nicholas wondered when LaCroix's eyes strayed to the tense features of his current lover. Even with most of the room between them, the three older vampires could each feel the anger that radiated from their new companion. "She's not going to be as easily controlled as you seem to think," the golden-haired knight predicted.

LaCroix's laughter was heartfelt. He turned his glittering gaze to Nicholas. "Gabrielle will be anything I wish her to be, my dear Nicholas."

Janette glanced at the lovely redhead, and her stomach twitched in response to the master vampire's assertion. LaCroix was very right; this child was totally his.

"Janette understands," LaCroix observed as he watched her.

Janette sat back in her chair and looked at Nicholas. Her nod was barely perceptible, but the confirmation created a bleakness in the former knight's eyes that saddened her. LaCroix would destroy Gabrielle Colby, as he did all who were foolish enough to love him.

"You still haven't answered my question, LaCroix," Nicholas pointed out to their master a short while later.

"We will be leaving in a few days," the ancient vampire stated. His look had boldly fastened on the lovely woman who passed among the tavern's patrons and laughed as she hadn't done in the entire time he'd known her. He wanted her, again.

Gabrielle felt the heated stare that LaCroix directed at her, and she quivered at the awakened desire his thoughts whispered to her mind. Her hands trembled ever so slightly when she placed mugs of ale on a table and smiled vaguely as she accepted the coins that paid for the drinks. Despite the knowledge that she should not go near him, Gabrielle went to the table in the corner.

"What has angered you?" LaCroix asked when she stood next to him.

"They are questioning Thom's absence," she whispered.

"What have you told them?"

"Nothing," she stated, her eyes dark with annoyance. "I owe none of these people explanations."

LaCroix nodded his approval, and laughed softly.

Gabrielle caught the worry in Nicholas' gaze and she touched his shoulder. Blue eyes were startled when he looked up at her, and she smiled.

"It is no different from any other answer I have given those who interfere where I have no wish for them to be, Nicholas. My ill-temper is the fabric of local legend," she laughed. "Most people wonder how Thomas puts up with me, not the other way around."

"This town is populated by fools of the worse kind then," Nicholas graciously commented.

"That is something I have known all of my life, sir."

In spite of himself, Nicholas laughed at the warmth in her voice and relaxed. He felt in many ways that he was only now meeting the woman who was Gabrielle Colby.

LaCroix watched the exchange through narrowed eyes, and felt an unwanted twinge of resentment at the shared amusement of his two children. Janette was calmly indifferent, though he sensed her agitation lurking just beneath the carefully cultivated composure.

"Do you wish me to bring you anything?" Gabrielle asked as she unconsciously moved closer to LaCroix. She raised her hand, almost touched him, then drew back.

LaCroix felt the waver in her resolve, and he let the back of his hand whisper a caress over her bare arm. She shivered at his touch. He took her hand and brought the cool, trembling fingers to his lips. A breathy sigh became a low growl and he smiled as the vampire woke within her. When he stared up at her, incandescent gold eyes poured liquid fire into his and she leaned closer to him.

"LaCroix?"

Beneath the obvious longing, there was bewilderment layered in the soft utterance, and he rose.

"LaCroix!" Nicholas knew what the ancient vampire intended, and he was equally

certain how foolish the action would be.

LaCroix ignored him and walked ahead of Gabrielle. As he crossed the common room, he knew she followed, eyes downcast. He passed through the kitchen and she stopped long enough to issue orders for several meals that had been requested. Her roughened voice trailed after him as he slipped down the hallway that would take him into her chambers.

* * *

"He's going to -- "

"He's going to do exactly what he wishes, Nickola!" Janette interrupted. "No one has noticed their departure."

He looked around, she was right.

* * *

Gabrielle opened the door to her rooms and after closing it firmly behind her, she twisted the lock into place. Before she could step further into the room, LaCroix pinned her to the solid panel and leaned into her neck. She cried out in agonised pleasure when his fangs sank into her flesh and the long length of his body pressed her tightly to the wood at her back. Fire raged through her veins and she arched into his embrace.

"Please, LaCroix?" she breathed minutes later as his tongue stroked the fresh wounds in her neck. She squirmed against him, caught in the throes of an arousal she couldn't control.

"What do you want, pet?"

"You," she sighed and pulled his head away to look into his eyes. He smiled, and she knew he laughed at her. The knowledge angered and humiliated her. She tried to pull out of his arms but he kept her in place with the force of his weight.

"I hate it when you laugh at me."

"Hate isn't an emotion you associate with me, Gabrielle," he whispered smugly. "Don't pretend it is."

She stared at him for several moments, then suddenly jerked forward. The taste of his blood was as intoxicating as the finest wine, and she savoured the essence of his surprise as she drank. Seconds later his hands tangled in her hair, gently drew her away from his neck. He stepped back and she shuddered violently when he began to undress. Her smile was salacious, eager. LaCroix's hypnotic gaze never lost hers. She removed her skirt and blouse and the garments beneath them, then followed him to the bed.

LaCroix settled on his back and she started to lie next to him. He shook his head and she knelt at his hip, her eyes questioned silently. He caught her hair in his fist and lowered her head, until he felt resistance to his wordless command. Grey eyes had grown huge and she stared at him in confusion, and mild disgust. Irritated, LaCroix held his annoyance in check, then told her exactly what he wanted of her.

The challenge hung between them for long seconds, then her head dipped and her tongue glided over him, the caress experimental and hesitant. When his breath became a hiss of enjoyment, she relaxed and grew more intent on her task. LaCroix laughed softly and ran pale fingers through the silky mane of her hair as her mouth willingly explored more intimately.

A short while later he pulled her away and she trembled visibly when LaCroix laid her back against the sheets and spread her thighs. Expecting his possession, she gasped in shocked surprise when he draped her legs over his shoulders and his mouth sought her most private places. Her fingers knotted in the bed linen as the probe of his tongue grew more demanding. She writhed against the unbearable pleasure and her head fell back to the edge of the bed. Long auburn hair brushed the floor, luminous eyes closed, and her fangs ached with hunger as she screamed...

* * *

Janette's hand shook as the sound of Gabrielle's scream brought a sudden hush to the noisy common room. She knew the cry had not been fear or pain, and a shudder ran the length of her spine as she tried to still the twisting in her stomach. Nicholas had risen instantly, and she saw several other men headed toward the back of the Inn. She remained where she was.

* * *

Nicholas reached the passageway first and he whirled to stop the charge of the local men. His vampiric gaze froze each of them in turn as he spoke soothing words and assured them there was nothing wrong. He would find the landlady, and she would be fine. It took precious minutes, but eventually he was left alone in the corridor.

The lock snapped with no effort and he swung open the door to Gabrielle's chambers. His concern died in his throat. Her head dangled over the edge of the bed and her eyes opened, but he knew she wasn't aware of his presence. LaCroix's silvery head rose and as Nicholas watched, the master vampire knelt back and drew Gabrielle up into his arms. His fangs sank into the softness above her breast as he pulled her closer and their bodies merged.

Gabrielle's low growl echoed in his mind as Nicholas turned back into the hall and leaned against the closed door. The sounds blurred within his head yet each was painfully explicit; LaCroix drinking, the rhythm of their lust as they strained for release, and Gabrielle Colby's passion-rough voice declaring her love again and again. She belonged completely to LaCroix.

* * *

The following evening, Jacob Bentley entered 'The Guardian'. With him were Reverend Jack Ward and Elias Porter. Gabrielle eyed them sharply when they hesitated near the door and spoke in frantic whispers between themselves for several moments. She glanced to the far side

of the room at LaCroix, who merely raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Uh... Gab... " The Reverend cleared his throat and began again, his nervousness apparent. "Mrs. Colby, we have some rather difficult news to tell you."

She waited, hands crossed on the bar, eyes guarded.

"Get on with it, Jack," Bentley prodded. He glanced around the tavern room, noted that it no longer filled nightly with most of the town's men. Each evening fewer and fewer people entered the Inn. Tales were spreading like wild-fire, and the citizens of Pirate's Cove were growing more afraid of the mysterious strangers who resided at 'The Guardian'. Without conscious thought, his gaze found the one they feared most. LaCroix returned his look without visible reaction; the nobleman's impassive assurance set Bentley's ragged nerves further on edge.

Diana Miller had eased behind the bar and was chewing her bottom lip as she strained to hear what the men were saying to Gabrielle. She knew the news would not be welcome, at least not to her.

Gabrielle raised one eyebrow, waited for the Reverend to swallow, then leaned forward, elbows on the bartop.

"If you are trying to spare my feelings about something, Reverend Ward," she said softly. "I assure you it is not necessary. Simply tell me what has upset you so?"

"We've found Thom," Bentley stated bluntly when Ward again seemed unable to deliver the news.

"And?" she prompted.

"He's dead, Gabrielle," Jack Ward finally found his voice. "I am so sorry."

"Why?" she asked. "Did you really think I would be broken-hearted by such news? I have never pretended to love my husband, gentlemen."

"Bitch!"

Diana lunged for the unsuspecting landlady and grabbed a handful of flowing red hair. "You probably killed him yourself!" She spun Gabrielle around and landed a resounding slap to the other woman's face. Silence fell over the room as everyone present turned to watch the sudden spectacle. Diana continued to rain blows upon Gabrielle and shriek accusations that quickly diverted all eyes to the silver-haired man in the corner.

* * *

"She's not going to be able to maintain her control for much longer, LaCroix," Nicholas stated impatiently.

"Is there a reason why she should?" the master vampire asked blandly.

"Damn you!" Nicholas snapped as he stood and began to close the distance between them and the enraged redhead. He knew Gabrielle was already transforming.

Janette's laughter joined LaCroix's as the two watched.

"And here I thought tonight would be as boring as others have been recently," the beautiful lady commented softly.

LaCroix answered the observation with a flicker of smile and leaned back to watch what would unfold. Seconds later, he was forced to rise.

* * *

Gabrielle snarled in fury when Diana's fist connected with the underside of her chin. The wild blow would have knocked a mortal unconscious, the vampire merely struck back. Diana went tumbling over the wooden bar to sprawl in an ungainly heap on the dusty floor. Reverend Ward's muffled yell warned her that they'd seen her vampiric nature. Before she could decide what to do, she saw LaCroix leave his table.

The ancient vampire was a blur of motion. The door to the Inn slammed solidly shut and the few unfortunate people who had not escaped the moment the altercation had erupted were now trapped within the tavern. Nicholas barred the rear exit and the room grew silent. The scent of fear was arousing and tainted the air with a kind of madness that infected the four vampires as one.

Jack Ward fell to his knees and began to pray. LaCroix's laughter was insanity visited upon tortured souls, and he chose his first victim. He enjoyed the irony of allowing the Reverend to witness the deaths of his congregation before he himself would be sent to rest. Nicholas had attacked only once, when he had been deliberately provoked. Gabrielle took Diana Miller, but no other.

Blood flowed freely as LaCroix and Janette purposefully selected their prey and enjoyed their impromptu feast. Gabrielle had backed away in the face of their savagery and she tried to accept the reality of what her life had become. In LaCroix's arms it had been easy to deny what she'd begged him for, she belonged to her lover, his blood coursed through her veins. She felt sickened by the carnage she now saw him revel in. She turned to run.

* * *

Nicholas waited, read each of the shifts in her emotions as she absorbed, probably for the first time, the true depth of her bond to LaCroix. Janette had played this game with the ancient vampire for more lifetimes than Nicholas had been with them, she enjoyed the blood hunt almost as much as LaCroix himself. Despite her exquisite beauty and charm, Janette was her master's child, which is why she understood him as few others could. Gabrielle, despite her adoration of LaCroix, was horrified, and Nicholas was ready to stop her flight into the night when she ran toward him.

"Those who escaped," Nicholas said when he held her arms and forced her to look up at him. "They'll be back soon, Gabrielle. We have to prepare to leave."

She nodded, reordered her thoughts with real effort. She needed to separate herself from what was happening. "Your horses are in the stable. There's a stallion in the last stall, he's mine. I'll collect your things and meet you at the back."

When she would have turned to look into the room, Nicholas tightened his grip and shook her. "Go! They'll follow when it's finished, Gabrielle. Not until then."

She clenched her teeth and nodded as tears slipped from her eyes.

Nicholas watched her climb the stairs, felt his heart wrench as he understood just how much of her innocence still remained to be corrupted by LaCroix. **This** was what he had sensed, the thing that had driven him to fight the ancient vampire's desire to stay here. He had failed, miserably, to protect her.

* * *

Gabrielle figetted next to the raven black stallion, her eyes continuously drawn to the rear exit of the old Inn that had been her home for the past two years. She whispered soothing, nonsensical words to the impatient horse, barely conscious that she did so.

Nicholas finished checking the saddles and glanced down at the frightened woman who stared at the door as if she could will it to open and reveal her lover's safe return. Precious minutes passed, and he felt the tension rise as they were forced to wait for LaCroix and Janette. He didn't risk going back inside, as long as they kept the back of the Inn clear, the two vampires would have unimpeded access to freedom.

"Nicholas!"

Gabrielle's frightened gasp turned him back to the building. He saw at a glance what had brought out her panic. Fire was beginning to light up the night, the flames clearly visible against the inky blackness of the sky. He handed her the reins and headed toward the Inn. He was less than six feet from the exit when it flew open and LaCroix strode into view. Janette was only a step behind him.

"Where is Gabrielle?"

"LaCroix!" She was in his arms instantly and shook with relief as he kissed her forehead.

"The horses are ready," Nicholas informed them, his voice tight with annoyance. "We have to leave, LaCroix!"

The master vampire smiled at the urgency revealed in the tone, but he nodded his agreement. With Gabrielle held close to his side, he followed the knight and Janette to the nervous animals.

"He is a beauty," LaCroix murmured in appreciative appraisal as he stroked the neck of Gabrielle's stallion.

"He is all I have left of my father's wealth," she told him. "He was called 'Thunder', my father's whimsy because he was born during a storm."

"Could we discuss this at another time?" Janette asked, her voice tinged with pointed irritation.

Gabrielle nodded and quickly mounted the horse. Beside her, LaCroix did the same, then led the way into the night. Behind them, shouts and the sounds of crackling timbre broke the

silence. The smell of smoke permeated the air for miles.

* * *

Gabrielle stared into the shadows that surrounded their temporary refuge. She had led them quickly and stealthily to one of the few places which had offered her sanctuary during the past few years of her life. The townsmen had pursued briefly, before fear dimmed their enthusiasm and they gave up the chase. They would be much braver during the daylight hours, she knew. LaCroix, Nicholas and Janette had heard the whispers, 'vampires', ancient legends and horror stories come to life among the townsfolk. The men of Pirate's Cove no longer hid behind the safe illusion that the killer of their fellows was a rabid wolf.

Nicholas watched her, felt the shifts of her fright and confusion as she tried to comes to terms with all she had witnessed this night. She was presently as much afraid of them as she was the enraged crowd who planned to hunt them. LaCroix had made no move toward her since they'd stopped. He too watched her, and Nicholas felt the master vampire's curiosity.

"How long are we going to wait here?" Janette demanded as she paced, then stopped to peer into the night sky. "We have only a few hours before dawn."

LaCroix leaned against the solid wall of rock that braced his back, unconcerned. Nicholas knew it was a careful façade, that LaCroix waited for his lover to go to him. The younger vampire was equally certain she would not. Which meant --

Nicholas rose and approached her, his footsteps soundless.

"We have to leave here soon," he said softly as he sat beside her.

"I know," Gabrielle replied in a whisper. "There is a safe place not far from here. They are very afraid of the ruins." She turned to look at him and her expression reflected amusement and irony. "They fear the ghosts who haunt the grounds. Many of their fathers were among those who burned the witches of Salem, and I think they believe it is those spirits who walk these ruins in search of their killers."

"And are there ghosts?" Nicholas asked with a warm smile.

"I think there are, but none who would harm anyone."

"He's waiting for you to go to him," Nicholas told her after several moments of silence.

"I don't know what to say to him," she confessed with a shudder. "I knew nothing about him when I agreed to eternity in his arms."

"And now?" Nicholas questioned.

"And now I know even less."

* * *

LaCroix's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he continued to stare at Gabrielle and Nicholas. He heard their words, but it was the undercurrent of empathy that bonded the two which sparked anger within the ancient's mind. She was being drawn ever closer to Nicholas, in a way that

disturbed LaCroix. Her soul belonged to the master vampire, but there was a near reverence in her expression as she looked at Nicholas. Adoration was reserved for LaCroix, yet she still could not see his companion in the same way she clearly had come to see LaCroix's vampiric nature -- somehow, she thought Nicholas better than them -- and that understanding enraged LaCroix.

* * *

Gabrielle felt the burst of fury within her lover's mind and turned startled eyes to him. Without conscious consideration she stood and went to him. Seconds later, she dropped to her knees and reached for his hands.

"What is wrong?"

LaCroix smiled, the shift of his features eased none of the anger that glittered in his brilliant eyes and dominated his handsome face.

"Do I frighten you again, my pet?"

Her fear became more vividly enhanced by the soft query.

"I should, Gabrielle," he warned in a gentle whisper.

"Why would you want me to fear you, LaCroix?" she asked, her puzzlement real. "I love you. You know there is nothing I would not do for you."

"We shall see, Gabrielle," he murmured thoughtfully. He pulled her into his arms and she sighed when his lips touched her throat in a light kiss.

"LaCroix!"

"The ruins are not far from here," Gabrielle told him when Janette's hiss of rage stabbed the sudden silence of the night. When he nodded and released her, she rose. Minutes later they had left the isolation of the clearing.

*** * * AUTHOR'S NOTE * * ***

"The GABRIELLE Cycle" is an on-going series that chronologically begins with this story. NIGHTS PAST as printed here is only one-third complete, and the contemporary portion of the story has been appearing as a series of short stories in a collection called KNIGHTBEAT. Because of creative differences between me and Fenris House, the publisher, the storyline has now been altered from what was originally printed. At some point, in future, if the reading public is interested, the entire series will be printed, in its original form, without the tie-ins to the series of novels currently being presented by Fenris House.

"D" Talks

Tearing the wings off bats may be amusing, but it's not wicked -- you know?

The Editor asked me to offer a gracious greeting to those of you I have not encountered thus far. I am "D." Some of the Children have taken to calling me David; a liberty taken by their Master some time after he took up with the Trollop.

For those of you who must know absolutely everything, I am older than the Beatles, {aren't we all} but younger than Stonehenge. Meaning I have Done it before Darlings ... so, if you have needs or need help with your needs, I'm Available for Almost Anything, Almost Anytime.

I have to admit that I tend to reminisce, but I will do what I can, and I won't censor ...unlike **some**. My motto is each to their own tastes ... I've tried most and you're welcome to them.

I do have two letters from a pair of truly unique Night Children. I know how impatient some of you can be, even when you have an eternity or two. But first, I want to thank "Delighted in Dartmouth" for the Halloween gift. It's so nice when they remember the **holidays**, and what a novel idea it is ... a fanged Barbie doll with a stake through her heart. Couldn't happen to a more deserving doll. I owe a short note to Dejected and Rejected: Face it, sweetie, if he's hot for the redhead, either admit defeat or buy a jar of hair colouring.

I may not be able to fix everything, but I'm always available, so don't be shy.

D



Dearest David --

I have thought long and hard about writing this letter, but I can no longer assure myself that I can manage my present situation, in any fashion. I know I need advice, desperately so.

I've been involved in a relationship which demands total and absolute surrender of everything I am. I love him so completely that I don't, as a rule, find his obsessive need to possess and control me a real problem. But, I **do** find it exceedingly difficult to share his heart with another. He doesn't understand that he tortures me with his eternal quest to reclaim his lost "son". I have tried to walk away from him, but he refuses me my freedom. He assures me I don't even want to be free, not really, and I believe him when he smiles and invites me into his bed. (I feel like such a slut, but I can't get enough of him.) He **is** everything to me; lover, teacher, companion, friend -- the bane of my existence, but the only thing which makes my life bearable.

He abuses me, he humiliates me, he rapes my spirit while he seduces me, and he often laughs at me. Yet, I do adore him. I've died for him, twice now, and I will live forever for him. He knows I can't escape my love for him. I fear I am quite mad. What should I do? (I would advise that suggesting I leave him would quite likely lead to your own destruction David, so please do be careful of your reply -- I would hate to taste your blood on his lips.)

Gabrielle Sinclaire
(L'enfant et l'amour de LaCroix)

My Dear Gabby:

Desires, Lusts and Unquenchable Needs, ... you have only a handful of years and may be too young to know of the full depth and range of the appetites of an elder such as your Dark Lord.

I have no doubt that when it comes to LaCroix, you have thoughts that are long and hard, but that is not enough. Do you understand that emotions add zest to our feeding?

I am reminded of a female; her maliciousness added to the bouquet giving it that slight metallic taste lingering on the lips ... somewhat like coyote ... musty, nasty and piquant.

My point is that there are many elements that enhance the flavour of these humans, often making something rankly inferior into a truly great vintage. It is these nuances that elders like your Dark Master find truly intoxicating. Do you see, Gabrielle, for LaCroix, **Blood is Not Enough**?

Your words speak most eloquently of your "relationship" and, I have no doubt that His Darkness is well aware of your passions. Who among us does not know the stirring stories of the Master and the Slut? **He** knows those who speak ill of **Him** and ill of You, and as you

know only too well, **He** has shown **His** anger to those who would cause you harm. You can not escape your love for **Him**. Do you not see that LaCroix has grown accustomed to your taste, your smile, your face ... you get my point? Do you expect **Him** to admit it?

Some mortals experience madness in their passions, and some admit that their love for another is more than a little insane. I find that their fervour adds a certain zest; a great passion is a spice that truly enhances any feeding.

Ah, you are as experienced in lust as you are lovely, truly your Master has chosen well. LaCroix is intoxicated by the sheer range, depth and variety of your emotions. The scent of that bouquet allures even the most jaded appetite. I trust you can see more clearly now? Say hello to "Blue Eyes" it's been ages.

D:

I was just speaking with Gabby and before she told me to get lost, she mentioned that I needed to seek professional help. I guess that's why I'm writing to you, to get professional help.

D, no one likes me -- why? I find myself to be rather good looking, maybe not as handsome or majestic looking as his Ancientness LaCroix, the Great Master, but then who is?

I think I'm intelligent, although Nick keeps referring to me as a Yutz. D, what's a yutz?

I've got a world of information in my head that I'd just love to share. But there seems to be this small problem -- no one stays around long enough to share it with.

D, can you help me? I really do enjoy being a vampire. So maybe I can't quite get the knack of flight. Or I'd rather drink a cherry coke than blood. But really, deep down I'm just as rotten to the core as the rest of them.

Please send me your reply right away. Or, if you'd rather, by all means drop in for a visit and stay awhile. I've plenty of coke in the fridge.

Yours truly,

Ford Peterson -- Vampyre at large!

My Dear Ford:

Such a surprise ... after all these years and you still sound so refreshingly unique. Ford did you forget about the secret again? I just know that your Master, His Darkness, told you about the secret. Okay, the secret, Ford old chum is that no one knows that vampires like you or I exist. It's part of our elegant mystique. And Ford dear, rotten is not enough. Many mortals are nasty, mean, gossiping and malicious, and while that does wonders for their blood,

they lack the panach that vampires aspire to.

You need a mentor. Someone who is malicious, sneaky, sly and without honour. No Ford, politicians do not have the wit or imagination that typifies **our kind**. There are one or two humans in the U.S. that you could observe. Your Dark Master finds them too vapid, but you can sample them if you like that sort of fare, and Ford ... remember the secret.

If you want to be truly alluring, develope an attitude of reserved, disdainful silence. Those who are worthy of you will be drawn to the aura of mystery that surrounds you; those who are not tempted, are not worthy of you. It's that easy.

I'm afraid I can't join you in a Cherry Coke. Some of His children have such perverse tastes; even the **Knight** eats ketchup of all things.

And Ford, remember the secret and try out your new self at the **Raven** ... disdainfully silent; it will enchant them faster than fresh blood.

IN CLOSING

Thanks to everyone who made this venture possible, mostly to Bill and Peg for believing my weird ideas just might work! This was a difficult project to complete, but I hope you've enjoyed the results. I've been involved in things fannish for over ten years, and it's been an interesting and sometimes rewarding experience. Recent events in my life have changed that, and I'd like to take a minute to say "goodbye" to everyone and thank all of the special friends who've been a part of the learning and growing experience over the years. We've all had our ups and downs with life, and fandom was always a pleasant, creative escape. I hope for those of you who remain an active part of it all find that it never ceases to be so.

FOREVER KNIGHT Zines:

ON THE WINGS OF THE KNIGHT, Edited by Ann Hupe: Bill Hupe and Peg Kennedy, Footrot Flats, 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI, USA 48854-9445

GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS, (Order from Bill Hupe), Submissions/Editor: MaryAnn McKinnon, 254 Blunk Ave., Plymouth, MI, USA 48170-1102

KNIGHTLY TALES, Edited by Jessica Daigneault, P.O. Box 334, Lisbon Falls, ME, USA 04252-0334

(Novels) DREAMING OF THE KNIGHT, FALSE HEART, KIND SOUL: Susan Garrett, 14B Terrace Ct., Toms River, NJ, USA 08753

FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA also has a publishing division of their club, and is presently accepting submissions for a variety of theme and general zines. The Editor is club co-founder Tracy Essam.

Clubs:

FOREVER KNIGHT CANADA, Tracy Essam, 302 Roselawn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4R 1G1

THE FOREVER KNIGHT FAN CLUB, P.O. 1228, Boston, MA, USA 02130-0011

Actors' Clubs/ALL Officially Sanctioned:

GERAINT WYN DAVIES, Rosemary Shad, 4133 Glendale Rd., Woodbridge, VA, U.S.A. 22193

NIGEL BENNETT, Star Urioste, P.O. Box 55572, Hayward, CA, USA 94545-0572

DEBORAH DUCHÊNE, 960 Jungsong Way, San Jose, CA, USA 95133-1120

Margaret B. Lawlor
502 Shrader Street
San Francisco, CA
USA 94117-2714

As you can see from the cover of KNIGHT'S PAST, Bea is an artist of exceptional talent. Her beautiful portraits ***are*** *available by Commission.*

Also, Bea designs Stationery, one of her many designs is the border that frames Nick on the cover portrait. Her catalogue is a piece of art in and of itself!

Bead jewellery and Stained Glass work are also among this lady's talents.

Send a SASE (or a SAE w/IRC) to the above address and I'm sure you'll be delighted by the range of lovely artwork available from this talented and special lady.

PRISONERS OF THE (K)NIGHT
The first Con devoted solely to

FOREVER KNIGHT

March 29th-31st, 1996
Yorkdale Holiday Inn
Toronto, Ontario

All Cast and Crew are being invited,
and to date we have received replies of
interest from:
GERAINT WYN DAVIES, NIGEL BENNETT,
Music Composer: FRED MOLLIN

Pre-Registration is open May 10th, and will run through November 1st. Weekend Membership is $30 (CAN), if you are booking a room at the Host Hotel, $35 (CAN) if you are not.

Address all correspondence/questions
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David Gracey
203 - 23 Oriole Road
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4V 2E6